

On the Normalization of South African Politics

Ian Shapiro

THE MOST remarkable thing about South African politics is how unremarkable they have become. I say this as someone born and raised there, who left in the early 1970s at the age of fifteen. On returning for a year's sabbatical leave in Cape Town in 1997, I quickly discovered that the country I grew up in no longer exists. What has replaced it is in some ways more African and in some more cosmopolitan; in almost all respects it is a far cry from the South Africa I departed a quarter of a century ago.

Most striking about South Africa in the 1960s was its extreme isolation. By this I don't only mean its ostracism from the world community. That was tangible enough well over a decade before sanctions would begin biting. But focusing on ostracism misses the degree to which apartheid South Africa's isolation was embraced by much of the white elite, English as well as Afrikaans. Part of this was, no doubt, a defensive response to rejection, but not all of it. It is hard to overstate the degree to which white South Africa saw itself as one of the last outposts of Judeo-Christian civilization, fighting the twin evils of communism in the East and moral and social decay in the West. The ferocious laws designed to suppress communism were paralleled by the often ludicrous but no less seriously meant battery of laws and regulations to halt moral decline. From the Immorality Act, to the laws banning virtually everything except religious service on Sundays, to the laws against every sort of gambling, to anti-drug laws that were harsh even by contemporary American standards, South Africa's governors saw themselves as drawing multiple lines in the sand. Banning *Black Beauty* was perhaps the comic apotheosis of their gro-

tesque endeavor: they thought of themselves as Puritans no less than as racial purists. *Playboy* was banned as pornographic; we had no idea what real pornography was.

Just as white South Africans were massively ignorant of the rejecting world they eschewed, so were they ignorant of black South Africa and its inhabitants. By the 1960s the homeland and Bantustan resettlement policies had herded nonwhites into townships outside the suburbs that ringed the inner cities. Suburban whites felt even more threatened by the blacks they had banished than by the world outside South Africa. We who lived in Johannesburg's northern suburbs never thought of trying to visit Soweto (which was, in any case, illegal), less than half an hour's drive away. Our relations with blacks were limited to the obsequious interchanges characteristic of dealings with servants. Of blacks living further to the north we knew nothing. Our passports were not valid for any African countries even if they had been willing to admit us. The exceptions proving the rule were the Portuguese colonies in Angola and Mozambique. Lorenzo Marques (now Maputo) and Beira were seen as places where the risqué few allegedly took off for long weekends involving gambling, drugs, and black prostitutes. These places were said to be rife with syphilis and Arab sailors who would slit your throat for a wristwatch. Respectable people kept away.

THINGS COULD not be more different today. This is most dramatically evident in the changes in urban geography that have turned South African cities inside out. Apartheid cities were well-heeled at the center, banishing poverty and urban squalor to the townships outside. Now South Africa has American-style inner cities that the white middle classes avoid as much as possible, limiting their pathways to business districts and

daylight hours. Hillbrow, which had been a center of Johannesburg's nightlife and progressive culture (such as it was), is now a stark and frightening shadow of its former self. The signs of violent crime, and measures to prevent it, are everywhere: bank guards carry automatic weapons in plain view, squalor and destitution abound. In the suburbs, garden walls have grown into fortresses topped with barbed wire and ostentatious alarm systems. The inner cities have been ceded. Instead of locking blacks out, whites now lock themselves in.

Fear of crime is rampant, endlessly sensationalized in the media. This too has an American ring in that whites mainly talk about crime while blacks mainly suffer it. The great majority of violent crime is committed by poor non-whites against poor non-whites, much of it in the course of gang violence associated with drugs and organized crime. Certainly whites, especially lower-middle-class whites, also feel vulnerable. The high incidence of daylight armed robbery, rape, and visibly threatening poverty amid plenty, makes this inevitable. Yet here too South Africa no longer seems exceptional. Cape Town is like Los Angeles: what life is like depends on where you live. Rondebosch and much of the southern suburbs could easily be Beverly Hills or Brentwood; the Cape Flats could be Watts. The parallels in between hold as well. Sea Point used to be a quiet, largely Jewish retirement neighborhood. Now it is more like West Hollywood with its adult video stores, bars, and strip joints. The wealthy protect themselves with sophisticated security systems in gated communities staffed by private security forces. The poor fend for themselves with little help from often corrupt and in any case massively overworked police. Those in the middle manage as best they can. Politicians grandstand with ever more draconian proposals. Turning unused gold mines two miles underground into prisons was one of the more notable ministerial suggestions of 1997. Why didn't Pete Wilson think of that? Dramatic as the residents find the changes, they are part of the normalization of South African life. The norms are depressing, no doubt, but why should we expect things to be different?

The urban geography story is the tip of an iceberg. Much white fear and black propaganda is about Africanization, yet the degree of Americanization is more striking. In the 1970s there was no television and the press was myopically inward-looking. Our news from the outside world came from British Movietone newsreels, often weeks out of date, shown in cinemas before feature films. Today television is filled with American fare, CNN is broadcast nightly, and the movies (no longer called films) in the theaters are identical to those playing in every American city. The markets and shopping malls contain African curios, but also streams of Chicago Bulls paraphernalia and the like. Figures like Michael Jordan, Wesley Snipes, and Michael Jackson are immensely popular. Despite continuing British influence manifested in Land Rovers on the streets, the BBC, cricket, rugby, and soccer, it is U.S. influence that seems ascendant. American fast-food chains litter the cities as they do here. IBM, Jeep, and Kodak are making rapid inroads into markets abandoned to the Europeans and Japanese during the sanctions era. The upscale shopping malls at the Waterfront or in Cavendish Square in Cape Town are packed with the same clothes, computers, sports equipment, videos, and CDs that one finds in any comparable American mall. McWorld seems to be embraced with open arms through much of the social order. It is, indeed, striking how little anti-American sentiment one discerns. Perhaps this is one of the final ironies of apartheid's legacy: white Afrikaner culture now absorbs much hostility that might otherwise be directed at American cultural imperialism.

SOUTH AFRICA'S politics have become notably banal. Under World Bank and various forms of corporate pressure, the African National Congress (ANC)-led government quickly abandoned its (moderately) redistributive Reconstruction and Development Program in favor of a conventional neoliberal economic restructuring diet intended to produce Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) by cutting public spending, limiting the deficit, holding taxes down, reducing inflation, and privatization. GEAR has been

in place for over two years without producing discernible growth, employment, or redistribution. Although inflation has been brought down into single digits and spending targets have been more or less met, only the informal economy appears vibrant. Employment in the formal sector continues to shrink due to a weak gold price and the loss of industrial jobs to the East. The currency has lost over a third of its value since as recently as March 1997, and high interest rates (well over 20 percent for most purposes) stifle domestic entrepreneurship. This is not to mention their effect on the poor, who might otherwise use the sixteen thousand rand (about \$2,700) government grants to leverage the cost of building a house. The ANC's 1994 pledge to build a million houses over five years (widely seen as responsibly moderate at the time) is less than 10 percent fulfilled. Minimal inroads have been made into transforming the educational and health care systems, particularly in rural areas, so that millions continue to live without the most rudimentary provisions.

THAT THE government finds reality so difficult to reshape is less deserving of comment than how it, and other powerful political players, respond to this fact. As the ANC drifts to the right, most of the official opposition parties are either indistinguishable from it or to its right on most matters of political economy. The National Party is riven by internal conflicts and a terminal identity crisis. The Democratic Party looks healthier, particularly in the Western Cape; polls reveal it to be the principal beneficiary of National Party disarray (though some Nationalists will move to the minuscule right-wing Freedom Front). Democratic Party members see themselves as the middle-of-the-road, pro-business "sensible chaps party," and although there is a good deal of energy in their younger, increasingly Afrikaner, leadership ranks, it is doubtful that their support will break into double digits in the 1999 elections or that they will develop significant nonwhite grass roots. The Inkatha Freedom Party, the ethnic Zulu party that has historically favored privatization, has not opposed GEAR (Inkatha remains a junior partner in the government). It shows no signs

of developing into a national party. Even in its regional stronghold in Natal, Inkatha has the support of only about half of the Zulu population. The United Democratic Party, organized by Roelf Meyer, formerly of the National Party, and Bantu Holomisa, ousted from the ANC, takes few identifiable stands on policy questions. It seems to want to occupy whatever ground might open up between the ANC, the Democratic Party, and the remnants of the National Party, while linking itself decisively to the new order. (Hence its acronym UDP, evidently intended to be as close as possible to that of the United Democratic Front, the fulcrum of the 1980s resistance movement until the unbanning of the ANC.) Some polls show the UDP garnering support in the high single digits. But no one sees it as a serious challenger to the ANC. In any case it does not criticize GEAR. The one party that one might have expected to emerge on the left is the Pan Africanist Congress, but it remains in the same disarray as when it garnered negligible support in the 1994 elections. In any case it makes few public statements on macroeconomic policy.

All this means that the opposition parties are largely irrelevant to the political choices of the day, which are played out within the ANC. Here one might expect opposition to neoliberalism to manifest itself, but the main likely vehicles are all problematic. The Communist Party remains part of the ANC alliance, along with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). As elsewhere in the world, the communists are in disarray. Some of their leaders and intellectuals march in lock step with the ANC leadership. Others criticize it regularly, in the press if not in Parliament. But because everyone knows that the CP would not win a single seat if it ran outside the ANC alliance, it has no real leverage over decision-making.

COSATU's relationship with the ANC leadership is more multifaceted. One might expect it to be a major constraint on neoliberal policies like GEAR and a force for downward redistribution, and to a limited extent it is. Although COSATU endorsed the ANC's recommitment to GEAR at its late 1997 conference, it also got much of what it wanted included in the Basic Conditions of Employment legisla-

tion passed at around the same time, over strong objections from business, and in contradiction to GEAR's logic. The increases in the minimum wage and a forty-five-hour work week contained in the bill are not only resisted by business, however. Given South Africa's exceedingly high unemployment (somewhere between 25 percent and 33 percent, depending on whose statistics you believe), these policies are contentious within the labor movement. South Africa's corporatist policy-making bodies such as the National Economic Development and Labor Council involve big business and big labor, but not regional unions (not to mention the unemployed) whose members may stand to lose all employment if wages are not permitted to fall. COSATU argues that the unemployed are substantially dependent on the employed, so that there is not really a conflict of interest as far as fighting for high wages is concerned. This may be true some of the time, but it glosses over important issues of gender and urban-rural inequality, and in any case it ignores greater net gains that might be achieved if unemployment could be reduced. The Basic Conditions bill is an obstacle to this to the degree that it is enforced, though what this degree is remains unclear.

THIS LAST point merits emphasis in countries like South Africa, which have severely constrained institutional enforcement capacities. Parliament passes all kinds of (often contradictory) legislation that emanates from different ministries (GEAR from the Finance Ministry, the Basic Conditions bill from the Ministry of Labor) and in response to different interest groups, but this says little about what is actually implemented on the ground. In the case of the Basic Conditions bill, for instance, it may well be that regional unions and employers conspire to ignore it. By the same token, the high unemployment statistics may reflect other weak institutional capacities. The informal sector of the economy is obviously thriving, but little of it appears in government statistics because people want to avoid taxation. The multimillion Rand taxi business is a good example. The government is powerless to collect revenue from it, and most of the thousands of people who work in

it may well be counted as unemployed. The considerable distance between Parliament's will and what actually happens is a severe practical constraint on the ANC. Even the "independent" reserve bank is a lot more constrained than those of less vulnerable economies, as we saw in mid-1997, when speculative attacks on the rand forced an abrupt about-face of its announced policy of bringing down interest rates to stimulate the economy and promote domestic entrepreneurship. South Africa's foreign-exchange reserves are no greater than a medium-sized hedge fund. This makes the country an exceedingly weak player in the poker game of currency speculation.

Why does COSATU not push for more redistribution? Remarkably, South African tax rates are comparatively low (the top tax rate is similar to that of the United States, low by world standards). Why is there not more pressure from the organized left to redistribute downward through the tax system, either directly in the form of transfer payments or indirectly in the form of funding public works? Ironically, part of the answer may lie in the highly skewed income distribution itself: raising taxes on even the top 20 percent would mean new taxation of many COSATU members. Combine this with the high unemployment levels, and it becomes less surprising that redistributive pressure from COSATU is so muted. For the most part, redistribution to those at or near the bottom would involve the transfer of resources and benefits to people significantly below the economic levels of COSATU members. And substantial redistribution would take some of these resources from them.

If not organized labor, what of a populist revolt among the ANC grass roots from those who are seeing few or no improvements in their lives—such as the unemployed, the sort of people Winnie Madikizela-Mandela can mobilize? In a country with the high levels of mobilization that South Africa has seen over the past decade and a half, one might anticipate that this would carry over into pressure on the ANC from below.

The fact that Madikizela-Mandela was outmaneuvered in her 1997 bid for the deputy

leadership of the ANC with virtually no fuss (aside from the drumbeat of hysteria in the white press until it was accomplished) suggests that grass-roots populism has some distance to travel as an effective force within the ANC. This might change, but there are major obstacles. Half of the unemployed live in rural areas, making them exceedingly difficult to mobilize. Those who live in urban areas (mainly squatters' camps in and around the towns and cities) might seem more likely candidates, but there are plenty of Latin American and Asian illustrations of the proposition that the urban poor can remain politically unmobilized for decades. Moreover, the ANC is not ignoring this group entirely. Many squatters' camps have some, admittedly minimal, basic amenities that they lacked five years ago. I have seen uniformed government employees cleaning street gutters in Nelson Mandela Park squatters' camp in Hout Bay. Initially it is an incongruous sight, alongside the tattered washing strung between corrugated iron shacks and the scrawny roaming dogs. But small absolute increases in living conditions may not be so lightly dismissed by the inhabitants of these camps. If you have been living amid stinking refuse for years it makes a difference when it is removed. Radicals have been disappointed for centuries when the dispossessed fail to make global distributional comparisons, focusing instead either on their own absolute conditions or on those closest to them in the socioeconomic order. Little is known about the expectations of South Africa's poor, but there is no evidence that the ANC is losing much support among them. Support for all political parties has softened somewhat, but it remains substantially where it was in 1994. No one expects the 1999 election results to be significantly different.

SOME POLITICAL commentators excoriate the ANC for having sold out on the revolution in South Africa. To me these critics seem to miss the fact that there never was a revolution. There was instead a negotiated settlement, designed in no small part to head off the possibility of revolution. The political pact that led to the transition seems underwritten by an implicit social contract between

the new political elite and those with economic power: the still overwhelmingly white landed and business elites. The government avoids putting large-scale expropriation or increases in taxation on the table, it does not interfere with the self-protection of gated communities, and it largely toes the line so far as neo-liberal economic reform is concerned. The quid pro quo is that the economic elites do not defect. Indeed, they may actually be supporting the ANC government more than most people realize. South African political parties are not required to divulge their sources of financial support. At one conference on parties where I questioned the wisdom of this, I found the ANC representatives more hostile to disclosure than anyone else. This naturally prompts the suspicion that they would be the most embarrassed were the sources of their funds to become public. This is yet another area in which the dilemmas of South African politics seem all too familiar to the American observer.

More apposite than proclamations that the ANC has sold out on the revolution was the prediction of one friend after the 1994 election that now Mandela would find out what it's like to be a black city mayor in the United States. It is easy to be taken aback by the extent to which this is true. In interviews with several ministers and deputy-ministers in May of 1998, I was struck by how much they have embraced the same mantra as New Democrats in the United States and New Labour in Britain. Phrases like "individual responsibility" and "budget constraints" fell effortlessly from their lips as they told of the limits within which they operate, insisted on the importance of reinventing and downsizing government, and of privatizing as much as possible, even public works. As with GEAR, one wonders whether these policies actually have more to do with satisfying particular interest groups than with providing what South Africa most needs. The trouble with endlessly positioning oneself to have the "correct" incentives for the private investor is that often this will not result in the delivery of goods and services to poor populations. Moreover, the goalposts continually shift. Given the speed with which capital moves in the world today, there will always be destinations that

provide more attractive returns. The result is that governments committed to this strategy find it increasingly difficult to keep control of their policy agendas. It might make more sense for South Africa to focus less on elusive foreign investment for a while, and more on getting interest rates down and stimulating the domestic economy, worrying less about deficits and inflation and more about growth and employment. (After all, the Asian miracles of the 1970s and 1980s were not achieved in open economies.) That suggestions of this sort seem to fall on deaf ears in

the ANC should scarcely surprise us. If those who benefit from the neoliberal juggernaut can get their way in countries that have had institutionalized social democratic politics for decades, why would they not get it here? ●

Thanks, without implication, to Bruce Ackerman, Courtney Jung, Mahmood Mamdani, and Adolph Reed, Jr., for comments.

IAN SHAPIRO teaches political science at Yale. His new book, *Democratic Justice*, will be published by Yale University Press in the fall.

The End of the Yeltsin Era

Robert V. Daniels

THE COLLAPSE of the Soviet Communist regime in 1991 is widely explained as the failure of a utopian experiment. In reality communism ceased to be much of an experiment within months after the October Revolution. The true failed utopian experiment was Russia's adventure in free-market capitalism from 1991 until this year. The cumulative disaster of this course was evident early on to anyone not disabled by the ideological blinders of the Chicago School economists, but the crisis of August 1998 finally drove home (to everyone but President Clinton and his advisers, it seems) the futility of proceeding on the path of Yeltsin-style "reform."

Russian economic policy under Boris Yeltsin, like the breakup of the Soviet Union, was driven neither by ideology nor by practicality, but rather by Yeltsin's personal vendetta against Mikhail Gorbachev and a determination to undo everything the latter stood for. Having faced down the coup plotters of August 1991 and having presided over the collapse of Communist Party rule, Yeltsin embraced the free-market theory touted by Yegor Gaidar and the new school of Russian econo-

mists enthralled with the antigovernment doctrines of the Chicago School. Under Gaidar as the first postcommunist economic chief and acting prime minister, Russia launched into reform: price controls were removed, inflation soared, and state-owned assets were indiscriminately privatized, all to the advantage of former Soviet managers and the banking conglomerates that quickly sprang up. The disruptiveness of Gaidar's reforms aroused the ire of the existing parliament—the Russian Supreme Soviet elected in 1990—and Yeltsin compromised in December 1992 by installing the former gas-industry minister Viktor Chernomyrdin as prime minister. Chernomyrdin was inclined to a centrist balance of markets and state management, but to keep his new job he had to bend to Yeltsin's will throughout the crisis year of 1993.

A second, even harder-edged period of "reform" set in after Yeltsin blasted the old Parliament out of existence and imposed a Constitution made to order for his own authoritarian instincts. Nothing then stood between Russia and dictatorship. The newly elected Duma, though its majority were oppositionists of the Communist and nationalist persuasions, was virtually powerless, and the prime minister served at the pleasure of the president. The only thing that saved the country from the sce-