

Review: The Crisis in South Africa

Reviewed Work(s): Continuity and Change in Southern Africa by Gwendolen M. Carter:
The Struggle Is My Life by Nelson Mandela: The Ambiguities of Dependence in South
Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth Century Natal by Shula Marks:
The Crisis in South Africa by John S. Saul and Stephen Gelb

Review by: Steven Metz

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THE CRISIS IN SOUTH AFRICA: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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Gwendolen M. Carter, *Continuity and Change in Southern Africa*. Los Angeles: Crossroads Press, 1985. 117 pp.

Nelson Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1986. i + 249 pp.

Shula Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth Century Natal*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. ix + 171 pp.

John S. Saul and Stephen Gelb, *The Crisis in South Africa*, revised edition. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986. 245 pp.

There is no shortage of analysis concerning the current crisis in South Africa. In fact, studies of this sort—particularly those dealing with the dynamics of black politics—represent one of the true scholarly growth industries of the past half-decade. As can be expected when the literature on a particular topic expands rapidly, this body of work exhibits a wide range in both quality and focus. It is accurate to say, however, that there are a few themes which run throughout. Most writers, for instance, concur on the forthcoming collapse of apartheid. Nearly all agree that the current situation in South Africa is one of system-challenging crisis, and not simply an interregnum in the evolution of apartheid. And finally, most assume a point that radical scholars have made for some time: the crisis in South Africa is not simply one of political/racial domination, but represents a synthesis of racial and class struggle.

Immediately beyond this fragile consensus, disagreements emerge among analysts of the crisis in South Africa. While all agree that apartheid will end, they differ on the length of time which this will require, and more importantly, on the exact nature of the force which will destroy it. In particular, debate ranges on the specific composition of this force, on the role of external support, and on the strategy and tactics which will prove most effective. As a corollary to this central debate, there is also disagreement over the nature and role of leadership in this process. The studies under review here provide

tremendously diverse perspective on these debates.

The works by Carter and by Saul and Gelb deal in particular with the nature of the force which will eventually destroy apartheid. Of the two, Carter's *Continuity and Change in Southern Africa* is the much less ambitious project. It is, in fact, the first in a published series of lectures at the University of Florida Center for African studies. As a recognition of the contribution which Gwendolen Carter has made to African Studies, these will be known as the Carter Lectures. The inaugural collection is constructed around three core essays dealing with the nature of coercive rule in South Africa, American policy toward South Africa and Namibia, and the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC). Also included are a brief, selective bibliographic essay on southern Africa and a reminiscence of Carter's experience with and interpretation of the process of African independence.

While the core essays provide eloquent summaries of the topics they examine, little that is truly new is provided either in the way of interpretation or recommendations. The approach is decidedly mainstream, and on the key problem—coercive rule in South Africa—Carter's conclusion is that (p. 20):

Only when responsible members of the government and industry are prepared to sit down with genuine representatives of the mass of the people to consider their demands for rights seriously, and to begin to implement the new patterns of life and activities for which they are striving, will South Africa begin to move toward a genuine degree of stability and relative harmony.

Crucial problems such as the question of exactly what will "prepare" the white elite to do this and how "genuine representatives of the mass of the people" will be discerned are not explained. The essays on American policy and the SADCC follow this pattern of combining lucid (if rather superficial) recount of pertinent events with well-worn suggestions. Overall the lectures included in this collection (and the bibliographic essay) appear intended for a general audience rather than for experienced Africanists. Thus the book might be of use as a teaching tool in an undergraduate class on Africa or current international problems, but it does not represent an important contribution to the scholarship on the crisis in southern Africa or South Africa itself.

Saul and Gelb's *The Crisis in South Africa* is infinitely richer, more detailed, complex, and ambitious. The approach is Marxist, as the authors assess both the potential for overthrow of apartheid and for a simultaneous (or near-simultaneous) workers' revolution in South Africa. Again the book is organized into three discrete essays. The middle one is a reprint of a 1981 book (with the same title as the present one) which was itself an expanded issue of *Monthly Review*. The premise of this is that South Africa currently is in a pre-revolutionary condition which Gramsci called an organic crisis. This combines the contradictions of racial capitalism—which creates a pool of cheap labor through the reserve and migration systems—and intensified political mobilization against this system. In such a situation, the primary interest of the authors is the nature of the political strategy which can focus the existing "revolutionary energy" and best guarantee that once this revolution begins, the momentum for change which it generates will lead to a socialist society rather than a capitalist one.

Following exquisitely detailed analyses of the structure of this organic crisis, the defense of the system constructed by the white regime, and the current potential for revolution, the authors examine the nature of the revolutionary movement. Their conclusion is a more or less standard one for Marxist assessments of revolution in colonial or semi-colonial situations: the most valid model for the revolution in South Africa is the national liberation movement format. There is no doubt that in this process the ANC will play a leading role since, as Saul and Gelb note, it is the liberation movement with the greatest legitimacy (resulting from the length of its struggle and its non-tribal nature) and because it is the only liberation movement with military potential (resulting from the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe in the early 1960s). At the same time, the authors recognize that two vital struggles are taking place within the ANC and the liberation movement in general. The first of these concerns the fragmentation of the movement by tribalism or counter-racism; the second deals with the role which the black proletariat will play in the ANC viz-a-viz the black bourgeoisie. Saul and Gelb are particularly worried that the nationalist-racial component of the revolution may completely overshadow what they see as the more important class dimension. In general, though, the ongoing mobilization, organization, and consciousness-raising of the black proletariat cause the authors to be at least guardedly optimistic about the future of South Africa in terms of both the destruction of apartheid and the construction of socialism. At the same time, they remain aware that struggles within the revolutionary movement today will have vital long-term effects on the future of that nation.

In Shula Marks' *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa*, and in the collection of works by and about Nelson Mandela, the emphasis is less on the broad structure of the forces that will eventually overturn apartheid and more on the dilemmas and development of specific leaders of black nationalism. Like the Carter book, Marks' work began as a series of lectures, this time in the Atlantic History Seminar at Johns Hopkins University. Because of the different nature of this lecture series, rather than dealing exclusively with the current crisis in South Africa, Marks' book is an historical study with implications for the present. It is, in addition, more of an important and original contribution to the scholarship on South Africa than a summary. Like the Carter book, though, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa* is eloquently written and enjoyable to read.

Marks focuses on the "changing nature of domination" in Natal during the first third of the twentieth century, particularly—as the title implies—on the ambiguities faced by black leaders. Without lapsing into a purely great man mode of analysis, Marks attempts to avoid the rigid structuralism which dominates much of the literature on the crisis in South Africa. Following a general introduction, the book is constructed on three case studies: Solomon ka Dinnuzulu, heir of the last Zulu king; John Langalibaele Dube, a leading Christian, newspaper editor and first president of the group which became the ANC and whom Marks describes as the epitome of the "new African"; and, Allison Wessels George Champion, a political and union leader. The relationship among the three is especially important. Solomon, while personally unworthy of leadership or even respect, retained some degree of influence and legitimacy by virtue of his birth. Dube and Champion, while leading their various constituencies through the traumas of modernization,

were eventually forced by the contradictions generated by this combination of leadership and racial subservience and oppression, to turn to Solomon in attempts to utilize the legitimacy of the monarchy. In an interesting conclusion, Marks notes that many of these same ambiguities are seen in Gatsha Buthelezi today as he "walks a tightrope" between the degree of acquiescence to white control necessary to avoid provoking repression and the degree of independence necessary to retain power in the black community. For Buthelezi, these ambiguities are perhaps more intense than for his predecessors, since increasingly the mantle of the Zulu monarchy fades as a source of legitimacy within the black community and is replaced by unremitting struggle against white domination.

This is perfectly illustrated in the political power of Nelson Mandela, whose current authority results not from heredity or real action, but from his position as the symbol of the struggle against apartheid. This, in fact, may be the primary and most important source of political legitimacy in a situation like South Africa where the decapitation tactics of the white regime mean that active political leadership spawns immediate repression.¹ As with the Saul and Gelb book, *The Struggle Is My Life* is a revision of an earlier edition—in this case, originally published in 1978. While Saul and Gelb's rationale for preserving the essence of their earlier work was their belief in the continued relevance of its analysis, for Mandela there simply is very little which can be added. The bulk of *The Struggle Is My Life* is composed of speeches, writings, and documents beginning with the 1944 Manifesto of the ANC Youth League (which Mandela helped create) and continuing through his 1985 statement explaining the refusal to accept P.W. Botha's offer to exchange clemency for a rejection of violence. These selections provide a powerful documentary history of the ANC and black nationalism in general, including the 1955 Freedom Charter and Mandela's statements during his 1960 and 1962 trials. Particularly instructive are his analyses of the changing tactics of the liberation struggle including intensification of various attempts at mass non-cooperation with the apartheid system in the 1950s, the need for the ANC (and Mandela himself) to go underground in the early 1960s, and the turn to violence that began at the same time. In addition to Mandela's own writings, there is an excellent short biographical introduction and descriptions of Mandela's condition and attitudes in prison provide by S.R. Maharaj and Michael Dingake. While little is included that has not been published elsewhere, the book does a solid service for those interested in South Africa by drawing together much vital information about and by Nelson Mandela.

In general, the works reviewed here reflect the broad nature of scholarship about South Africa today. All are infused with a sense of the intensifying crisis in that nation; all assume that the end of apartheid is imminent. The variation among them reflects the healthy attempt in South Africa scholarship to bring the wisdom and power of a range of theoretical and methodological approaches to bear on this problem. But in the end, these works, like the rest of the scholarship in this area, only hint at the most vital and scintillating questions of all: what real and practical steps will inspire the collapse of apartheid? and what will come next? The failure to deal with these questions is not, however, a flaw in the works under review here—all of them are important contributions to the literature—but simply indicate the future direction of analysis in this area.

NOTES

1. Political leadership is stressed here to distinguish it from the moral leadership of a Tutu or a Boesak, since it is likely that the reason that these men remained free in the period before international attention afforded them some degree of immunity was their fastidiousness in avoiding overt political leadership.