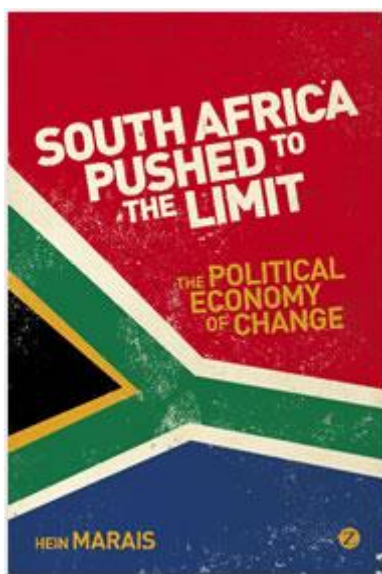


South Africa Pushed to the Limit: The Political Economy of Change

by Hein Marais



(London / New York: Zed Books, 2011), 566 pages, \$45 paperback

Helena Sheehan

published in *Monthly Review* in November 2011

<http://monthlyreview.org/2011/11/01/south-africa-the-left-must-launch-a-counteroffensive>

So many people, even otherwise educated ones, talk about South Africa as a fairy tale. Once upon a time there was evil apartheid. Nelson Mandela (and some other people too) stood up to it. He spent many years in prison. Then, due to international pressure and some national leaders changing their minds, he was released. Then there were democratic elections. Then South Africa lived happily ever after. It even hosted the world cup. Ok, there were problems with Thabo Mbeki trawling the internet at night and getting it wrong on aids. There are problems too about persisting poverty and rising crime, but they will be sorted in due course. The TRC was an inspiring catharsis. No. This book is the perfect antidote to that version, which is so utterly wrong.

Of course, *Monthly Review* readers are far more sophisticated than that and are well familiar with the left critique of post-apartheid South Africa, particularly of the turn to neo-liberal economic policy. There is a sophisticated left intelligentsia in South Africa and abroad analysing the transformation of South Africa and their findings and arguments have found their way into *Monthly Review* and elsewhere over the years. This book is an excellent synthesis of all that as well as a provocative position explaining why it has happened and what scope there is for the left to chart an alternative path.

The words of praise on the back cover of the book from eminent South African academics suggest that it will become a classic, that it is the best overview of the transition, that this is the one book, if someone could only read one book, that a person should read to understand South Africa. There are more superlatives too. We are accustomed to hyperbole in this genre. However, I believe that every word is well deserved in this case.

The book is choc full of facts and insights marshalled deftly into an engaging narrative and astute expose of dilemmas, decisions and debates emerging in relation to the rhythms of socio-historical forces. It is a big book, but there isn't a wasted page in it. It is not possible to cover all the interesting and important points that are made in it in

a review. I know that there are a lot of books in the world and we can't read them all and we often make reading a review a substitute for reading the book, but please don't do so with this one. Read the book.

Marais begins with a sweeping summary of the legacies of history: colonialism, apartheid, patterns of capital accumulation, movements of resistance, dynamics of race and class. He takes great care in explaining the complexities of the political settlement. After a long struggle, the two sides had fought to a draw and came to negotiate rather than to push for all out victory on either side. There was conciliation to avert cataclysm. Geopolitical shifts had brought a dissolution of moorings, an undermining of the idea of a socialist alternative, a retreat from radical politics globally, the ascendancy of neoliberalism. The prevailing balance of forces, nationally and internationally, ensured that the real winners were conglomerate capital, particularly the financial sector and the mineral-energy complex. Marais demonstrates a strong continuity between late-apartheid and post-apartheid economic policy.

The dilemma of the new government was how to reconcile the insertion of the nation into the global churn of capital with the promises of radical redistribution it had made as a liberation movement. The ANC privileged politics over economics and stressed nation building over class struggle. Marais charts the achievements in terms of democratic elections, constitutional rights and wider access to health, education and material infrastructure, but weighs these against the daily experience of injustice and inequality. The settlement was not the win-win situation it was supposed to be, especially for lives lived in poverty, disease, unemployment, alienation and precariousness as a result of subservience to the mystified force of 'the markets'. South Africa, as almost everywhere, lives under the increasing dominance of finance capital: "Finance capital no longer spurs industrial development, but is geared at extracting maximum returns, even by dismantling or destroying industrial capacity. Its metabolism is now fundamentally parasitic." Structural changes in circuitry of capital accumulation have shifted balance of power between private capital, the state and other social forces, particularly the labour movement. He moves between the generalities of the global system and the particularities of its circuitry in South Africa.

There has been privatisation of public property, regressive taxation, facilitation of capital flight. This expatriated capital represents wealth amassed from South African labour and from resources extracted from South African soil. Redistribution has been conflated with black economic empowerment, which has brought the enrichment of a layer of black 'tenderpreneurs', who, while unproductive, provide black cover for white capital and engage in conspicuous consumption, simultaneously representing collusion in the impoverishment of the masses and embodying the secret aspirations of many of them. Some of these were leaders of the liberation movement. The ANC has become enmeshed in intrigue, acquisitiveness, corruption, all of which were evident in the otherwise inexplicable arms deal.

Controversially, Marais does not go in for explanations of the transition centring on betrayal. It is undeniable that certain figures have betrayed the ideals for which they stood. However, the revolution was not hijacked, he argues, because "A neoliberal development path was adopted, and has been maintained, because the balance of forces within the ANC alliance, and between it and corporate capital, favours such a course." It unfolded as it did, because of the hegemony of capital and the weakness of any alternative hegemonic project. He repudiates the talk of a 'struggle for soul of ANC'. There is no soul or essence to be reclaimed. The ANC always has been a broad coalition of political traditions and cultures and its ideological character has been constantly contested. This has become even more the case since it has come to power. Even the party of apartheid has collapsed into it.

How the left should relate to the ANC is a major issue dividing the left. This debate played itself out in the pages of *Monthly Review* in 2001 and 2002 in the contending contributions of John Saul and Jeremy Cronin. There is a strong left inside the ANC, mostly concentrated in COSATU and SACP. There is a growing left outside the ANC, much of it once inside ANC, gathering under the banner of Democratic Left Front. Some of us have strong ties to both. The left within the ANC has been outmanoeuvred, marginalised, stifled, even expelled, starting in the Mandela presidency, but intensifying during the Mbeki presidency. The disciplining of Jeremy Cronin after his interviews with me was one episode in this story. The left within argued against the '1996 class project', which resulted in the shift from RDP to GEAR, an authoritarian imposition of a neoliberal economic policy and an accelerating de-ideologisation of politics.

The ANC, although atrophying at branch level, presiding over high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality, and repressing dissent, still is seen as the bearer of a narrative of people's aspirations. It accommodates contradictory impulses and shifting positions as distillations of a supposedly consistent narrative of national liberation. Many people who criticise and protest against the ANC nevertheless vote for it and even belong to it.

The left within made a concerted push for power in 2007, taking sides in the gladiatorial combat between Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma. Zuma presented himself as a simple and earthy man of the people in contrast to the elitist and vindictive figure of Mbeki and became a lightning rod for disparate frustrations and ambitions, both conservative and progressive, united in a coalition of the aggrieved. COSATU and SACP stumped the country for Zuma, despite charges of corruption and rape hanging over him and despite no evident ideological inclination to the left, and were used, dumped, marginalised or co-opted once Zuma came to power. Blade Nzimande, the general secretary of the SACP, may be a member of cabinet, but there has been no shift in economic policy. Marais is quite critical of this strategy, seeing it as an indefensible shortcut to power: "It wilfully chose the route of theatrical campaigning around a half-baked messianic figure over the painstaking slog of building a genuinely democratic left movement that could challenge for hegemony."

Frustratingly for the left, the ANC has mastered the art of 'talk left, walk right'. There is quite a lot of Marxist-Leninist vocabulary in speeches and documents that justify accommodation to capital under the banner of national democratic revolution and explicitly attack the left for suggesting otherwise. In contrast, Marais does not employ a lot of traditional Marxist terminology, but expresses himself in way that has internalised the Marxist-Gramscian tradition and brought it to bear in a fresh and grounded analysis of the world in which he finds himself. His key concept is balance of forces. All scope for will, decision, policy is in relation to socio-historical forces.

Marais has a good grasp, as very few analysts do, when it comes to the crunch, of the relationship between personality and history. There is no great man theory of history here. He barely mentions Mandela. He is wary of the habit of personalising complex political and economic dynamics, but he is quite sharp about how personae play into the interplay of socio-historical forces. He traces the shifts from the rainbow nation interlude under Mandela to the alliance of panafricanist romanticism with neoliberal exigencies of Mbeki to retro patriarchal dramaturgies that accompanied the rise of Zuma. That recent struggle, which was often phallic, violent and vengeful, mobilised the masses in ways that various social movements of the left have failed to do. It reflected longing for solid moorings and a confused politics of identity.

It is a complex society caught up in complex cross-currents. To quote Patrick Bond, it is "beset by enough fragmented voices, multiple identities and competing discourses to leave even postmodern analysts confounded." Contradictions proliferate. The concept of *ubuntu*, an ethos of communalism and mutual obligation, has been fused with neoliberalism and is employed by advertising copywriters to sell whatever is to be sold, while also doing service to absolve the state from its responsibility for social reproduction.

There is much detail about specific areas of South African life. Marais is particularly strong on the political economy of health, especially on how aids and tb are enmeshed with patterns of dispossession and dislocation along lines of race, class, geography and gender. He outlines the fiasco that resulted when aids became Mbeki's preferred arena for afrocentrist and anti-imperialist posturing. He admires the tactics employed by the Treatment Action Campaign, functioning both in co-operation with and opposition to the government and the ANC as the situation required. He tackles other areas too, such as education, although not as thoroughly as health. The reformed education system had two goals: economic growth and social equity. It has become a two-tier system divided along class and racial lines, where schools in leafy suburbs send learners on to university, while others are warehoused in township schools. His section on higher education is quite skimpy, although accurate in arguing that public space has been transformed into a commodified sphere in a way that promotes market methods and values, but does not advance knowledge. He shows how protests have resulted in policy reversals in areas such as aids treatment and the abandonment of

outcomes based education. He advocates universal income, not only to ease poverty, but to counter the commodification of life.

I would like to have seen this overview developed further in terms of symbolism, ritual, culture and ideology. It is a book on political economy and such books do not usually venture so far into these areas, but Marais is quite perceptive in this way, so it would have been good to have more of it, especially since an astute analysis of culture needs to be grounded in such a sound analysis of political economy. The book ratchets up 566 pages as it is, but leaves the reader thinking that its author has a lot more to say.

The left can take pride in what it has contributed to all that has been achieved and it can still achieve more under current conditions, but it cannot rest at that. It must contest the dominant paradigm that privileges the accumulation of capital over the welfare of citizens. Marais addresses the efforts being made by various social movements and left formations and thinks there is a need for all of these approaches, networking and collaborating, working the system from inside and out, as well as challenging the foundations of the system. To redirect the trajectory of the transition, he contends, the left must mount a counter-offensive on the basis of popular mobilisation in order to shift the balance of forces. No more rhetoric at odds with reality. No more short cuts.

Acronyms:

- ANC African National Congress
- COSATU Congress of South African Trade Unions
- SACP South African Communist Party
- GEAR Growth, Employment and Redistribution
- RDP Reconstruction and Development Programme

Helena Sheehan (helena.sheehan@dcu.ie) is an author and activist. She is professor emerita at Dublin City University. She was involved in the anti-apartheid movement in the 1970s and 1980s and has been going to South Africa since 2000, researching the transformation of academe and culture as well as participating in left politics there, both inside and outside the ANC