

# CURRENT BOOKS

## SCHOLARS' CHOICE

### *The South African Conundrum*

**THE MIRROR AT MIDNIGHT:** A South African Journey. By Adam Hochschild. Viking. 309 pp. \$19.95

**A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA?** Constitutional Engineering in a Divided Society. By David L. Horowitz. Univ. of Calif. 293 pp. \$20

Traveling around South Africa (as I do most years), one gets used to meeting different waves of visiting Americans. They come for many reasons. Ten and 15 years ago you met a lot of "Southeast Asia experts" who were anxiously retooling themselves and keen to move on to the latest crisis zone. For the most part, this lot exited fairly rapidly once it became clear that South Africa weighed a great deal less in the global balance than cruise missiles, the Japanese challenge in laptop computers, or whatever came after that. Mingling with them were many who saw in South Africa a sort of action replay of the American civil-rights struggle of the 1960s. Such characters were there because they wanted to re-live the dramas of their youth, dramas in which most of the whites were villains—Orval Faubuses, Lester Maddoxes and Bull Connors—and the blacks came out of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Others came simply as political tourists, confidently handing out prescriptions to the world's most complex and divided country. There have also been, let it be said, good and serious scholars such as Gwendolen Carter and Stanley Greenberg, whose work has made a genuine contribution to thinking about the South African conundrum.

One phenomenon I have grown particularly wary of is the instant American book about South Africa. The author of one such book proudly pushed his product

in front of me last year. One sentence, I remember, went, "Even at the end of our third day in Durban, Betty and I were still struggling to come to terms with the complexities of the place." Give it time, boy, I thought. What would Americans think of such instant authorities about, say, Mexico? They'd laugh, surely. So what's different about South Africa? The answer has to be that for most Americans South Africa is still like Mars: To have been there at all is remarkable; to return with moral or political insights, twice so.

Adam Hochschild's *The Mirror at Midnight* is more acute than many of these instant concoctions. The editor of *Mother Jones*, Hochschild has visited South Africa several times and read more than just the newspapers. A reader looking for an introduction to contemporary personalities and events in South Africa could do worse than read this book. But such books date quickly—and already Hochschild seems too romantically committed to "the struggle" to be a reliable guide to South Africa in 1991. That ubiquitous catch-phrase, "the struggle," was born when Nelson Mandela was serving a life prison sentence and almost every opposition group was banned. But a new era of reasonableness began on February 2, 1990, when President de Klerk announced, among other reforms, the pardoning of Mandela after 27 years and the lifting of the ban on proscribed groups. At the opening of Parliament this year, de Klerk announced the repeal of the Group Areas Act, which had made residential integration punishable by law. Such developments have rendered semi-obsolete many old assumptions about "the struggle."

This "new South Africa" has created a psychological problem for those within the

liberation movement who have, over decades, fallen in love with their own posture of romantic militancy against the forces of darkness. This subculture was self-consciously that of the victim. It identified with, and thus represented, "the oppressed." Since the oppressed were just that, they enjoyed the moral high ground—indeed, could do no wrong—while their opponents were simply "the oppressor," for whom no fate was bad enough.

Hochschild is a little too much of a pushover for this point of view, a little too unaware that this self-romanticization of the oppressed actually serves a variety of personal and political ends. He manages to mention some of the appalling crimes with which Winnie Mandela is associated, but then rushes to somehow blame the government even for them. Similarly, he mentions the subject of the South African Communist Party (SACP) only in order to mock the government for its wild McCarthyism. Yet the fact is that the SACP is probably the third most Stalinist party in the world, after its Chinese and Cuban counterparts. It controls a majority on the national executive of the African National Congress (ANC), and it dominated the first negotiations between the ANC and the government. Like it or not, the SACP is not just a figment of the government's overheated imagination. Hochschild tries hard to play down the party's power not because he is a communist sympathizer but precisely because he is a liberal and wants awkward matters like the SACP not to impair his romantic sympathy with "the oppressed." The oppressed, let it be said, are in general keenly aware of the openings this sort of determined gullibility affords them, and they take full advantage of it.

After Hochschild's book, it is a treat to turn to Donald Horowitz's eagerly awaited *A Democratic South Africa*? Horowitz, a professor of law and political science at Duke, points out a crucial fact: Intelligent analysis of South Africa has been bedeviled by a virtual conspiracy of silence over the significance of ethnicity.



Historically, white racists used divisions and antagonisms among black tribal groups to serve their own ends. "Black tribalism" became the excuse for creating "bantustans" or ethnic homelands—that is, for setting aside sparse patches of lands that tribal groups were told to regard as their homes. Tribal divisions also furnished the rationale for closed ethnic employment, whereby companies, if they wished, could employ members from only one ethnic group.

In response to this use of tribal antagonisms, liberals and radicals from the 1950s onward asserted that divisions between, say, Zulus and Xhosas, were either unimportant or merely the product of white manipulation. The ANC has declared war on all modes of acting or thinking on ethnic or racial grounds and said it will use "liberatory intolerance" (which ranges from legal suits to public humiliations) to end it. As Horowitz points out, such tactics have often been seen before in Africa: In the 1960s, Ugandan President Milton Obote, for example, under the pretext of ending ethnic conflicts, attacked the Buganda people and then set up a one-party police state. Nowhere have such tactics reduced ethnic conflict, but in every case they were successful in stifling democracy.

The fact is that only a minority of South Africans identify themselves as South Africans. As Horowitz's survey data show, the identities that matter are overwhelmingly ethnic or racial. Moreover, when the various groups are asked to specify which other groups they feel close to, a very defi-

nite pecking-order emerges. Zulus, Tswanas, and Sotho in the north, for example, feel much closer to one another than any of them do to Xhosas in the south. And despite all the fashionable black rejection of white (English-speaking) liberals, all black groups feel far closer to English-speaking whites than to Afrikaners. Strikingly, Jews were the group disliked second most, ahead even of Indians—this despite the fact that Jews have played so prominent a part in anti-apartheid politics.

Horowitz feels, surely rightly, that a peaceful and democratic future for South Africa depends on the recognition not only of the reality of these ethnic groups but of the inevitability of stress and rivalry among them. Fights between the ANC and the Zulu-based Inkatha have made headlines around the world and led to more than 5,000 deaths, but the ANC has also clashed with every other black liberation group. To accommodate such rivalries, Horowitz argues, Pretoria must adopt a federal structure of government.

There are many obstacles in the way of such a rational political course. As Horowitz admits, he found that ANC activists have for so long repeated their mantra about a unitary state—just as they have insisted upon inheriting the same state apparatus their oppressors used—that even those who concede the value of federalism have not thought it worth the immense effort that would be required to change the movement's mind about it. And indeed,

there is such ready recourse to violence within many black communities that it is not clear that elections of any kind are going to be at all easy to conduct.

Yet despite such difficulties Horowitz is still right, even right about federalism, whatever the resistance to it within the ANC. South Africa is probably the most fiercely divided society on earth. Its racial cleavages are infamous, but it is also deeply divided along ethnic, linguistic, regional, class, and religious lines. Everything we have learned from the experience of other nations suggests how easy it is for such societies to collapse into civil war, and South Africa could, all too easily, provide the world with the spectacle of a giant Lebanon. Such mosaic societies can be ruled for a time by authoritarian elites—Afrikaner or African—but violence will break through in the end. The only hope for long-term peace (and the economic growth which is probably indispensable to it) lies in a truly open-minded search for supple, enabling democratic institutions. The danger is that some will feel that the arrival in power of African nationalists will be the happy democratic ending South Africa needs. The point of Horowitz's work is that that ending has to be merely a part of a new democratic beginning.

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## *The Writer Without Certainties*

**PRECISION AND SOUL:** Essays and Addresses. By Robert Musil. Ed. and trans. by Burton Pike and David S. Luft. Univ. of Chicago. 301 pp. \$29.95

Among the great modernist writers only Robert Musil's name has failed to become a household word in the English-speaking world. His mind was as original

as the philosopher Wittgenstein's, and his fiction shrewder than Mann's or Proust's in its analysis of a world without certainties. Yet one obstacle stands in the way of Musil's reputation. His most celebrated work, *The Man without Qualities* (1930–43), is one of the longest novels ever written, and, despite its wit and brilliance, no one ever quite seems to finish it. Indeed,