REVIEW

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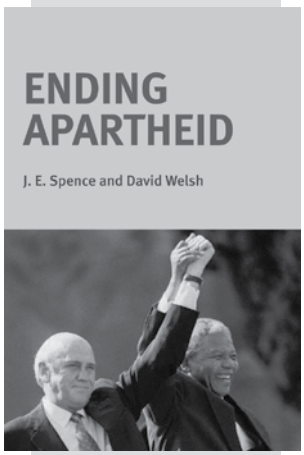

ENDING APARTHEID, by David Welsh and J.E. Spence; Harlow, U.K.: Longman, 2011; Pb, xi + 231pp; ISBN 978-0-582-50598-8.

Humane Realism

The struggle for democracy in South Africa continues to be the subject of numerous books of varying kinds and often uneven quality. We have seen a steady stream of memoirs and autobiographies of key players in the transition. (The worst of them raises the idea of bringing authors and publishers before a truth commission investigating crimes against trees!) In addition, academia has presented us with many erudite doctoral dissertations from a range of perspectives, some of which have been published – usually by hard-to-access (and very expensive) university presses, written in prose that betrays their origin. (Once again, my mind turns towards a 'tree commission'.)

David Welsh, one of the authors of the present book, has written probably the best recent single volume survey of the transition, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Jonathan Ball, 2009), a magnum opus that combines depth of analysis with a refreshing lack of ponderous academic prose. In this new book, he and Jack Spence have written a lively and concise account that extends beyond 1994 into the present century. Published in a series that combines serious academic synthesis with a style (and length) that makes complex historical events accessible to non-specialists, undergraduates and senior high school students, this new book is an example of what can happen (all too rarely, I am sorry to say) when compression meets erudition.

The first 144 pages of *Ending Apartheid* cover substantially the same ground as Welsh's earlier book. I can only echo what I said in a previous review[1]: while not as detailed as Rise and Fall, it avoids the Manichean trap of many authors who seem to think that readers need to be reminded of the evil of apartheid and all its works and empty promises, but tries instead to capture the complexity of South Africa's modern history. There was no one overarching reason why apartheid collapsed but a series of forces acting on it. Internal resistance politics in various forms and from a number of organisations, the highly effective way in which the African National Congress managed to discredit it as a system in the eyes of the world, the crisis of faith of the National Party establishment in its illegitimate 'child'; all these factors led to the negotiated transition and democratic election in 1994.

Similarly global political events – notably the end of the Cold War – played a major role in creating the context for democratisation. The fear of Communism suddenly disappeared over a matter of months in 1989-1991 and those who had acquiesced to apartheid (both within South Africa and overseas) lost all grounds for equivocation. The pseudoscience of race, which I suspect had a much greater tacit support among European governments in the first five decades of the twentieth century than many would now like to admit, was already discredited in all but the most extreme and unsavoury political circles. As in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, the emperors (at home and abroad) finally found they were without clothes.

What Welsh and Spence have done in this book, I think, is to compress and distil Welsh's earlier work. And, like well-distilled *mampoer*, the result is political history that is dense in detail, subtle in presentation, but packs a punch. Their brevity

highlights rather than detracts from the complex interaction of forces that made democratic change inevitable.

In addition to this, their book expands on the global and diplomatic dimensions of the transition. On one level this, too, is nothing new. Numerous books have been written about both the international anti-apartheid movement and on the apartheid state's complex diplomatic relations.

Whether one looks at it internationally, as Håkan Thörn[2] did, seeing in it the roots of contemporary global social activism, or at specific national movements, the history of this dimension of the struggle is increasingly well-documented[3]. Similarly there are many books on diplomatic relations between South Africa and other countries before 1994. Ronald Hyam's excellent The *Lion and the Springbok* and Thomas Borstelmann's *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle*[4] both describe the complexity of the period where the Cold War led to an uneasy coexistence between South Africa and two great democracies. From what was then the 'other side', Russian historian Vladimir Shubin's writings about the Soviet Union's support for the struggle and its political-military involvement in Africa and the Third World[5] serves indirectly to help us understand Western reticence with regard to taking a stronger diplomatic stance against apartheid.

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Now, all of this is fascinating stuff for historians and political analysts but, once again, often extremely dense reading for the non-specialist. What Welsh and Spence do admirably is boil it down – without dumbing it down – for the average reader. Foreign diplomacy, as one might expect, was complex, even byzantine at times. Apartheid in South Africa was one of many problems surfaced and occasionally submerged by the Cold War. While cold comfort to those in South Africa fighting the system, this needs to be acknowledged. Welsh and Spence eschew moral Manichaeism and show how varied the diplomatic response was.

Such an approach is naturally open to criticism, that they are prone to a certain 'softness' on apartheid. This is patently untrue: to understand complexity does not equate with moral relativism or justification. To use a criminal analogy, it is often useful – indeed necessary – to understand the mind of a serial killer, but this does not translate into justifying the killer's actions. The great 20th Century exponent of realism in politics, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (whose influence in this regard is acknowledged by many secular defenders of realist international relations) was not a moral relativist, but as a good Calvinist was all too aware of human fallibility and moral tragedy.

The realism of Welsh and Spence, informed and moderated by humane liberalism, in the face of overdrawn and sometimes histrionic idealism is most explicit in their Epilogue, which to my mind all too briefly examines South Africa after 1994. Here they sketch our domestic and foreign relations from the inauguration of Nelson Mandela to the election of Jacob Zuma. Once again, their concern is for careful, balanced investigation rather than partisan homiletics. They capture the essence of the Presidential styles that have had a distinctive impact on the

country – reconciliation, delivery and pro-poor populism – and the ways in which these reflect shifts in government policy. Once again, what is most striking in this chapter (possibly because of a certain parochialism in much South African political analysis) is their interpretation of South African foreign policy, which they suggest shifts uncomfortably between realism and idealism. This inconsistency, they suggest, makes South Africa something of an enigma: strong on human rights yet soft on dictatorships like Zimbabwe.

On the latter, it strikes me that they might consider further the 'liberation' factor. While it is true that our foreign relations may be based on our inherent tension as a state – a modern industrial state with all the institutions and accoutrements of a Western democracy, yet also a state that rightly prides itself as an African state committed to the African Renaissance – we need to look further.

When we look at Southern African states' fairly soft response to the crisis of Zimbabwe's political legitimacy, one country stands out for its different approach: Botswana. Like South Africa, it is a strong economy compared to other states, but unlike South Africa (and Zimbabwe) it never went through a war of liberation. I would be interested to see what the authors' think about the proposal that there remains a kind of subconscious solidarity between veterans of liberation movements now in government in South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe that makes a more robust diplomatic approach between them difficult.

These unsystematic thoughts of mine above highlight another positive aspect of this book. While it is comprehensive it does not inspire, as many 'textbooks' do, a sense of conclusion, a feeling that all the questions have been resolved: *Welsh et Spence locuta, causa finita*, to adapt a phrase still dear to the hearts of certain sections of the Catholic Church. If anything, the book has the effect (for me, at least) of wanting to read more, to revisit material that we've taken for granted.

And, if I may be really bold, I would also hope that the authors take their Epilogue and expand it into a more detailed examination of post-1994 South African domestic and foreign politics.

NOTES

1. Reviewed in Focus 57, May 2010, pp.86-88.
2 Håkan Thörn, Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)
3 See, for example: Roger Fieldhouse, Anti-Apartheid: A History of the Movement in Britain 1959-1994 (London: Merlin Press, 2005); Janice Love, The United States Anti-Apartheid Movement: Local Activism in Global Politics (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1985); William Minter, Gail Hovey & Charles Cobb Jr. (eds.), No Easy Victories: African Liberation and American Activists over a Half Century (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007); Penny O'Donnell & Lynette Simons, Australians against Racism: Testimonies from the anti-apartheid movement in Australia (London: Pluto Press, 1995).
4 Ronald Hyam, The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Thomas Borstelmann, Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle: The United States and Southern Africa in the Early Cold War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
5 Vladimir Shubin, ANC: A View from Moscow 2nd edition (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2009); Shubin, The Hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa (London: Pluto Press, 2008).