

BOOK REVIEW

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State of the Nation “1974”: *The New Radicals and The Vision of an Unachieved Future* by Glenn Moss

*“God, how I miss the Cold War!” mutters M (played by Dame Judi Dench) in the 2006 James Bond film Casino Royale. This line reverberated in my mind as I read a new book, **The New Radicals: A Generational Memoir of the 1970s** by Glenn Moss¹. Though it would be obscene to say that one misses apartheid, there is much to learn of the state of the nation today by looking back to the 1970s, not at the state itself (an authoritarian monster) but at the dynamics of a diverse and creative internal opposition struggle that was slowly gaining in momentum.*

From the perspective of the state, South Africa in “1974” (the early Seventies in general) seemed a place of near-totalitarian order. Despite attempts at international sanctions, the late 1960s had been a good time for the economy. The white trade unions were largely behind apartheid, the black unions non-existent. The African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress were banned, its top leaders in jail or under house arrest. The armed struggle was all but extinguished: the ANC’s activity in South Africa was largely reduced to the occasional pamphlet bomb – a packet of roneoed leaflets scattered by a large firecracker in public places, often done through the kind support of left-leaning British tourists helping the Movement in exile. And the PAC was already in the process of internal meltdown, riven by internal conflicts.

Internally, the homeland policy was being implemented with ruthless efficiency. The Liberal Party, the last non-racial party in the country, had been hounded by legislation into self-dissolution in 1968. Parliament for the most part – the National Party Government and the United Party ‘opposition’ – was complacent, apart from a pesky MP named Helen Suzman who used every bit of Parliamentary privilege to challenge the state. The two big forces of opposition were the Churches and the (mainly white) students. Thankfully, despite a handful of individuals (like Beyers Naude and Catholic Archbishop Denis Hurley) and a few organisations (like the Christian Institute), most of the time the churches just talked – and fought amongst themselves, particularly where they were dominated financially by white members enjoying the benefits of apartheid. Similarly, the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), it seemed, was in crisis: its black members had broken away, influenced by a medical student named Steve Biko, whose ideas came together under the rubric Black Consciousness and seemed to advocate racial separatism as the state did!

letting paranoia cripple their activities. Around the same time, and particularly in the late 1970s, they start developing ties with underground operatives from exile.

On the latter Moss recounts a hair-raising incident in Cape Town of being followed (by the Security police no doubt) in the company of a visitor from overseas – Breyten Breytenbach undercover as part of the ill-fated ‘Okhela’ group.

Inevitably, Moss himself is finally arrested in 1975. He is part of the group (Cedric de Beer, Charles Nupen, Karel Tip, Eddie Webster) charged with subversion ‘and furthering the aims of communism’. By this time a graduate student and moving into what would be part of his career in the 1980s – alternative media and political analysis – he has to move subtly in his defence: by now a Marxist by conviction, he must tread carefully so as not to get himself – and his friends – imprisoned.

He is lucky. As the book draws to a close, the judge rules that based on the evidence the state’s claim that Moss and company had tried to further the aims of the ANC and SACP is unproven and they are released. However noxious the laws they uphold, the South African judicial system proves itself committed to due process of law.

Glenn Moss has written a highly engaging memoir of an era that remains thinly examined by South African historians. Given the way that all too often South African history tends to follow the ‘official version’ of the time – the version of whatever ruling elite – this is not surprising. In an age where history, particularly in media and schools, tells history from the point of view of the dominant, the 1960s and 1970s tend to get short shrift. What Moss’ book, and other books on the period that are available, tell us is how the struggle for freedom involved not simply one movement and a few strategies, but a multiplicity of movements from all sectors of South African society using a pragmatic mix of strategies.

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I must give in the reviewer’s cliché and call it a page-turner; and, as a fan of the genre, I must say, too, that it reads at times a bit like a political thriller, John Le Carré on the Highveld but without his pessimism.

It is also a useful lens through which to look at the state of the South African nation in 2014, not because the era compares favourably to our own, but because of some of the underlying themes that, dare I say it, we may have lost in our age of freedom, apathy and self-aggrandisement.

On a basic level Moss’ book reminds us of where we have come from – and why we must do all in our power to say “Never, never and never again.” White privilege rested then on a combination of oppression rooted in law and enforced by a ruthless security apparatus. Today, granted, privilege is less white. The law is less oppressive and the ordinary security apparatus is less ruthless (and, let’s face it, at times quite incompetent). But privilege remains; if anything we are seeing in the last 20 years a growing gap between rich and poor, an inequality which if not addressed is a formula for social chaos. Today, too, there is a deep sense that privilege has a political dimension: the right connections guarantee advancement, so long as you conform. It can even, it seems, get you out of jail.

One does not have to be a Marxist to hold the view (of *inter alia* Patrick Bond, Martin Legassick, Dennis Brutus and, yes, Julius Malema) that we live in a new apartheid era: of rich and poor, of connected and disconnected. The New Left of the 1960s and 1970s, the people of NUSAS, SASO, Black Consciousness and the Liberal Party of 1968, would understand this. Like the youthful Glenn Moss of this autobiography, we too might admit that we don't have all the answers but that we need to find something workable to address the situation. Pronto!

Secondly, Moss' book reminds us of apathy, then and now. The vast majority of students Moss encountered were uninterested in politics; they wanted to do well, to feather their nests. So too now. It's not that people should all be political animals; politics is not everything. But as many a New Leftie reminded us then, everything is political. Corruption, bad governance, the tendency to authoritarianism that is the temptation of every dominant political party that is not challenged by civil society, all these things thrive when the public is apathetic. There is the risk, and temptation, to co-opt civil society into the ruling establishment too – often in the nation of that last refuge of the scoundrel, patriotism.

Neither Glenn Moss nor Steve Biko, nor any of the thousands of others, made the choices they did to get 'filthy rich'. They were motivated by a sense of justice outraged by an unjust system. And, bit by bit, they changed the system.

Does this sound familiar? It should. The tragedy of contemporary South Africa is how so many within the movements that created spaces of freedom and dissent in the 1970s – the students and churches in particular – have been effectively neutered.

Is it inevitable? Moss' book suggests to me that it is not. His book, describing the creative and challenging student politics of the 1970s, is a case study in how one can challenge everyone, disturb many and mobilise a significant number out of apathy. In a

sense too, the failure to find creative ways of mobilising dissent for change will lead to the collapse of vibrant democracy: rituals of elections engaged in by ever-decreasing numbers of voters, and apathy punctuated by occasional Marikanas.

Finally, let me look at self-aggrandisement. Politics in 2014 seems less about real public service and seeking the common good than about using office and influence for personal enrichment. This is, I'll admit, a sweeping claim but I believe it is nonetheless true. Just read the investigative press every week. At its worst, it seems that many politicians are in politics for what they can get out of it – tender deals, seats on boards, shares. At a lower level, for some it's a job: I have heard people from many parties talk of making a 'career' in politics. My sense of student movements now, based on many I've met in them, is that they are less about changing society than stepping stones into public office.

What Moss' memoir shows, in contrast, is politics as a service to the common good, the promotion of justice. Neither Glenn Moss nor Steve Biko, nor any of the thousands of others, made the choices they did to get 'filthy rich'. They were motivated by a sense of justice outraged by an unjust system. And, bit by bit, they changed the system.

Of course there are exceptions. There are people in the student movement who are involved because they want to see the best fruits of our democracy ripening. There are intellectuals and figures in the religious community who are trying to make a difference. There are public servants and politicians in every political party who

seek the common good. At their best, they are also deeply aware that the problems we face in 2014 admit no easy answers – but they are ready to grapple with the questions. For them Glenn Moss’ memoir should be a reminder of the tradition in which they walk and a source of inspiration to carry on.

For the others, one might hope that *The New Radicals* might challenge them to a new radicalism, the commitment we all should have to making democracy work.

NOTES

- 1 Glenn Moss, *The New Radicals: A Generational Memoir of the 1970s* (Johannesburg: Jacana 2014).