

Book Summaries

***list below comprises authors participating in the Johannesburg Roundtable only**

Raymond Suttner – Recovering Democracy in South Africa

Raymond is Emeritus Professor at UNISA, an interdisciplinary academic and previously, during the Apartheid era, an underground operative in the ANC who was jailed for his activities.

Summary:

A series of short essays which examine in crisp detail the state of contemporary politics in South Africa, especially with respect to various failings and deteriorations which the author argues have taken root under President Zuma's tenure as President. Prominent among these are erosions in respect for constitutionalism and the rule of law, leadership and ethics, race and gender relations. Although the book pulls no punches in its indictment of the President and his leadership ethos – and speculates on why it has proven so resilient and effective in the service of malign ends – it is also a clarion call to all South Africans to find new ways of recovering the spirit and promise of 1994. Democracy, he argues, has become almost synonymous with 'electionism'; what's instead required is a societal effort aimed at ennobling the practice of real democracy.

In the author's words:

On the need to restore a sense of unity: "My principal argument in all the essays that appear here is to suggest that this is not the time to foreground doctrinal purity of any type but to seek collaboration with a range of concerned citizens to restore legality and constitutionalism and to recover the democratic and transformational values of 1994. In general, I support the idea of a united front, though what I advance here may be wider and more inclusive than what is envisaged for instance by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa)."

On how parliamentarians can gauge their achievements: "Any project aimed at safeguarding and enlarging the scope of our freedom needs to represent the interests of all, wherever they are located, and whatever the conditions in which they live. Unless one speaks to their location, one is not offering a radical programme, no matter how an organisation describes itself. In erasing the life experiences of many who fall outside organised formations, one negates the idea of a broad emancipatory project."

On overcoming the current impasse: "We need to think beyond powerful individual leaders and, indeed, look also to ourselves in the various institutions, associations and organisations where we are located. We must use our power to find ways of reversing the current devaluation of democratic power and recover, rebuild and enhance the hard-won rights we so badly need to build our future."

Ferial Haffajee- What if there were no Whites in South Africa?

Ferial is the Editor of The City Press

Summary:

The author draws on both data and personal experiences in seeking to make sense of South Africa's (seemingly) increasingly antagonistic race relations and the socio-political context in which they arise. She explores the root causes of apparent contradictions, such as the current generation of "born free's" obsession with whiteness and white privilege in the face of tangible – if uneven – progress by a growing black middle class. The book touches on questions of nationalization and redistribution – in her mind, unworkable and ultimately fruitless endeavor that would leave whites less well-off but not improve the lot of the masses of South Africans stuck at the bottom of society. While the author bemoans South Africa's current fixation on what she argues is a disempowering and backward looking discourse on race, she notes how they feed into deeper questions of social justice, inequality and entrenched white privilege – issues unresolved by the end of apartheid and which could yet undo the country's progress if not addressed.

In the author's words:

On redistribution: "If white wealth were nationalized, the size of the black elite would swell slightly, but the overall impact would be economically negligible. In fact, the numbers obtained through the 2011 census show that if you take all white resources (from wealth and education to housing, toilets and water) and distribute them to black South Africans, it would hardly move the needle on national development."

On the workplace: "Workplaces are still run on Anglo-Saxon and Afrikaans dominant cultures, and for a generation of black people, they are deeply alienating environments where blacks check their identities in at the door and where old (white) networks continue to determine who gets ahead and who does not."

On the students' movement: "The students' movement will embolden the transformation initiative in other sectors as we saw happening in the midst of the student protest. They will show the adults."

On South Africa's future: "[SA] is young and a work in progress with the potential to be made into something even more beautiful. That is, if we want to make it and not only watch it fall and fail."

Mzukisi Qobo – Fall of the ANC

Mzukisi is Associate Professor at the Pan African Institute, University of Johannesburg; and Director at Tutwa Consulting Group where he focuses on Public Affairs and Political Risk

Summary:

A targeted critique of the ANC as an organization, the authors trace what they argue is the decline of the ANC from 1994. Considerable attention is given to issues of corruption, political arrogance and factionalism. The authors are unsparing in their criticisms of the ANC government's failure to reduce inequality and bring the majority of South Africans into formalized work, in part they argue because the ANC itself was initially unprepared to govern on being elected to power in 1994 and in the subsequent two decades failed to reform itself into a modernizing body capable of effective governance. They suggest however that the ANC's undoing was sealed by the post-Polokwane split, which exacerbated nearly all negative trends in the party. In their minds, what comes next after the store of liberation credit runs dry and the ANC brand no longer resonates with the public is unclear, though it imagines South Africa's opposition parties making significant gains – perhaps not till 2019 however.

In the authors' words:

On the ANC's current woes: 'On the basis of the current state of politics in South Africa – of corruption, factionalism, the use of politics as a means of accumulation, all of which are abundant in the ANC – we have come to the conclusion that, if the party does not make a serious U-turn, it will ruin itself, and our country at the same time.'

On history: "By over-blowing the trumpet of history, the ANC wants contemporary South Africa to remain trapped in history....If South Africans allow the ANC to let memory speak louder than prophecy, they must know that they are robbing themselves of what democracy is all about: the constant contemplation of a better future, not a better past."

On leadership: "Leaders should be able to create a space where trust and understanding can be nurtured, as well as to build, through dialogue, enduring bridges towards a shared destiny. We should not narrow our focus in search of leadership only within political parties... a new breed of leaders need to take the country forward, and that could help nurture and restore integrity in our political system and society."

Songezo Zibi – Raising the Bar: Hope and Renewal in South Africa

Songezo is the head of communications at Barclays Africa and former Editor of Business Day

Summary:

The book questions whether it is possible to repair what the author describes – in an analysis that ranges across a broad spectrum of themes (race, education, ethics, leadership, politics, government, violence, the role of women and social taboos) – as a broken society and furnish it with renewed purpose and strength, not least to confront head-on what promises to be a difficult future in the near-term. The author draws on personal experiences to examine contemporary notions of “blackness” in South Africa and suggests that our debate on transformation is overly-focused on race, whereas it should have a critical social justice component. He devotes considerable attention to the motif of violence in South Africa, a pervasive and complex feature of society that has never been confronted in practical terms, as well as leadership. He maintains above all that society must devise a set of ideas that can underpin a new consensus for a united future, one that permits all South Africans much greater freedom to succeed in all aspects of life, rather than a narrow future which delimits opportunities for all but the most advantaged and educated South Africans.

In the author’s words:

On South Africa’s current discourse: *“Our discourse avoids the most difficult questions. Coming up with solutions that challenge our dearly held narratives and beliefs in order to create a new society appears to be an unexciting task. Often ‘solutions’ amount to the propagation of internecine conflict, where one sector of society will eventually defeat the other. It is my view that should such propositions be actively pursued, this will only result in new imbalances and new, grave consequences.”*

On vision and leadership: *“The difficult task of building a healthy respect for public trust and ethics cannot succeed if it is not linked to a bright, clear political vision. While many may have totally given up on an ideal democratic order where the people have supremacy over the politicians, it remains our only salvation from the rapid decline South Africa has been experiencing for more than a decade.”*

On dealing with South Africa’s taboos: *“Is it possible to start a culture of speaking the truth and dealing with taboos? I believe it is... if there was a culture of informed, rich intellectual discourse about the issues that afflict society, coupled with a willingness and ability to learn lessons from other societies.”*

Moeletsi Mbeki – A Manifesto for Social Change: How to Save South Africa

Moeletsi is a journalist, private business entrepreneur and political commentator.

Summary:

Third of a three-volume series that started seven years ago investigating the causes of South Africa's – and the continent's – development obstacles, Mbeki investigates the myriad ways South African society is 'gridlocked' – and what the key causes of the current crisis are. Twenty-two years into South Africa's democracy, the author suggests that most of the core ingredients of the old, repressive white minority regime are still in place – from brutal police forces to failed education for the masses and rampant corruption. As such, South Africa is ripe for the kind of social and political explosions witnessed throughout history, not least because in the social structure of South African society identified in the book – comprising the economic elite, political elite, blue collar workers, underclass/unemployed, and independent/professionals/ entrepreneurs/NPOs – by far the largest is the underclass, which number almost half of the population. The degree of stasis in South Africa is so pronounced, argues Mbeki, that 'nothing has changed in South Africa in 350 years.'

In the author's words:

On violence and insecurity: *"Effectively, South Africa is a society with a hidden civil war. According to StatsSA, South Africa's murder rate...is over five times the global average... All these forms of violence are inextricably linked to current economic activity in South Africa."*

On political change: *"Political power has consistently changed hands in South Africa whenever the previous incumbents have been faced with rising and unsustainable costs related to the suppression of the underclass. Power has simply been handed over to the next group to administer, conditional on the protection of the core economic interests of the prevailing elite."*

On breaking the historic impasse South Africa finds itself: *"For South Africa to become and remain both productive and stable, it is necessary for the underclass to emerge from the prevailing system of perpetual bondage, breaking the deeply embedded social structure."*

On South Africa's enduring economic structures: *"We have a production economic system that, for the last 350 or so years, has really been driven by use of force against workers, against producers. We saw the most dramatic example at Marikana (when striking miners were shot by police)."*

Greg Mills – How South Africa Works: And Must do Better

Greg is the Director of The Brenthurst Foundation and a development expert with extensive advisory and research experience in Africa and elsewhere.

Summary:

Based on comprehensive field research and interviews conducted in South Africa in 2014/15, the book takes a sector-by-sector approach to understanding a way out of South Africa's economic mire. While recognizing the important achievements and gains made since the end of Apartheid, the author scrutinizes what can be done in practical terms in agriculture, services, manufacturing, mining and education/welfare to increase South Africa's economic competitiveness and, above all, address the main unaddressed challenge ailing the country – unemployment. Between 1994 and 2014 the number of employed almost doubled to 15.1 million. Yet, the number of unemployed (as defined broadly) increased even faster from 3.7 million to 8.3 million. The author suggests that part of the unemployment disease relates to government's – or at least part of government's – failure to acknowledge that it cannot create prosperity and jobs in the way a dynamic and incentivized private sector can. He notes that government is still held back by dogma and an inability to sever itself from the politics of the past.

In the author's words:

On blockages to prosperity: *“Constraints on growth and business cut across racial boundaries in South Africa. Equally their (businesses) success will ensure job creation across the economy – or as Deng Xiaoping famously observed: ‘it doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice.’”*

On BEE, social grants and jobs: *“As a project of elite transformation, BEE has been successful, but it is... more a burden for employers than a transformative agent for the unemployed. The social grant has been a great success in keeping an increasing number of people out of absolute poverty, but it pays far less than the salaries of even those unskilled jobs. Simply put, South Africa is not sufficiently rich to redistribute enough resources to address unemployment. It must expand the economic pie and increase the number of jobs if the poorest are to benefit.”*

On the jobs crisis: *“A new sense of policy urgency around jobs is therefore in the interests of the ANC, business, the unions and South Africans at large. As we learnt from the studies of Singapore and Malaysia, it is only with a laser-like focus and sense of urgency that South Africa will be able to transform its economy to the benefit of all of its citizens.”*

On the responsibility of government: *“Government needs to change rhetorical and administrative tack to focus on employment at all times. The departure point should be: ‘Do these actions promote employment?’.”*

Kevin Lings - The Missing Piece: Solving South Africa's Economic Puzzle

Kevin Lings has been the Chief Economist at Stanlib since 2001 and has also been a part-time lecturer at the WITS Business School for over 10 years.

Summary:

South Africa's economic trajectory since 1994 has been interesting and contradictory, argues Kevin Lings: much has worked, but much hasn't, too. In some aspects the country has been able to achieve incredible gains in increasing access to education and basic services. In others, however, the country has been less successful, unable to sustain strong growth rates nor generate the kind of performance in, for instance, agriculture that corresponds with the sector's potential. In little more than half a decade, South Africa has moved from an A grade investment rating (in 2009) to one that is currently just above junk status. It is a complex setting to describe and much less make sense of, according to the author. He navigates through South Africa's economic landscape through the framework of a four-piece puzzle. The pieces of the puzzle cover internationalization, fiscal policy, socio-economic backlogs and the fourth – the missing piece – government support of business. The business sector is part of any flourishing economy, and to be effective, Lings argues, business needs skills, fair regulation, technology and infrastructure. The book provides an accessible, solution-oriented overview of the South African economic story.

In the authors words:

On the narrative of the South African economy: "In South Africa there is a disconnection between the reality of how the economy has actually developed over the past twenty years versus the stated intention of industrial and trade policy since 1994."

On income inequality: "The current level of income inequality in South Africa is far too high, leading to increased social instability, high levels of crime, labour market unrest and inefficiency. As inequality rises, people at the bottom of the scale tend to borrow more to keep up, which in turn increases the risk of credit crisis. It also impedes the progress of health and education (through lack of available finance) and increases the chance of widespread civil unrest as people become more and more unhappy with their economic situation."

On the future: "Twenty years after the first democratic elections, it is clear that South Africa overachieved in implementing the first two puzzle pieces – namely, successfully integrating the country back into the world economy and instilling sound monetary and fiscal policy. Moreover, the country was reasonably successful at reducing the immense backlog of social goods and services, especially considering the enormity of the task. However, South Africa has failed to adequately implement the fourth piece of the puzzle, which required the development and maintenance of key economic infrastructural facilities."

Ray Hartley - Ragged Glory: The Rainbow Nation in Black and White

Ray Hartley is a political correspondent and former editor of The Sunday Times

Summary:

The book provides a trenchant account of South Africa's first twenty years of democracy. Its main themes break down over three presidencies and help explain how choices in each phase have brought us to where we are today. It pointedly engages with how the response to corruption in the Mandela administration set the tone for much of what we see today in the ability of the politically powerful to avoid prosecution. The book notes Mbeki's excellence in pushing for outwardly oriented macroeconomic policy but also his failures with regards to AIDS, crime and financial scandal. It also covers the skill with which the current president was able to move from a position of almost certain political exile to one of party leader, despite widespread concerns over his fitness for office. Overall, it lauds the passage of South Africa from pariah to vibrant democracy but bemoans the loss of its moral authority along the way.

In the author's words:

On the state of the nation: "It is on the one hand, an example of a successful transition from minority rule and oppression to constitutional democracy, with all the trappings of the modern state. There is much to celebrate. But, on the other hand, it is a country under siege, as self-enriching, extractive elites from the old and new orders seek to line their pockets at the expense of the poor."

On the Zuma administration: "Zuma's first term in office had been the weakest of any post-apartheid president. The economy had displayed anemic growth even as Africa became the fastest-growing continent. The credibility of the criminal justice system, buffeted by bad appointments and the decimation of its ability to fight corruption, had been severely damaged. And most alarmingly, a new culture of cronyism had set in."

On the future: "There is hope for South Africa. As Judge Cameron observed, it has a rich and vibrant civil society and media. But hope is precariously balanced against the rising tide of corruption and self-enrichment. The hyenas who were waiting quietly in the wings when Nelson Mandela took the oath on that winter's day back in 1994 have come into the open, and the powerful are no longer prosecuted when they abuse state resources for personal gain."

On the NDP: "South Africa's last best hope is the National Development Plan (NDP), which seeks to address these structural problems, to encourage entrepreneurship and to unlock the economy's job-creating potential....(but) It remains to be seen whether government has the appetite for a showdown with organized labour over putting the plan into action."