Jaundiced view of new democracy

SOUTH AFRICA’S BRAVE NEW WORLD

R W Johnson

Allen Lane

REVIEW

COLIN DARICH

R W JOHNSON’S new book on South Africa is described on the cover as “remarkable, angry (and) entertaining”. Johnson has become well known over the years for taking a gloomily Cassandra-like position on this country’s future, and this text is no different.

It is a critical account of the ANC’s first years in power, organised as a political narrative on this country’s future, gloomily Cassandra-like. Johnson has become well known for his writing, consciously or unconsciously, Johnson repeatedly reveals his hand. While Tony Leon was the “able young leader” of the DP, the “very simple and childlike” President Mandela spent his time “posing with the Spice Girls” or was often “at home doing nothing”. The late Steve Biko was Mbeki’s “benchman”, and it was only within the ANC that Kader Asmal was able to “pass for an intellectual”.

With reference to Trevor Manuel, Johnson even recycles the ancient “good economist / good communist” joke that was first told of Che Guevara in the 1960s. Women don’t do much better: Graça Machel is dismissted as Mandela’s “consort”, while Ruth First is just an “ANC journalist”.

Given his academic background - he was an Oxford don for many years - Johnson’s reliance on contemporary South African newspaper sources lays him open to criticism on method, and hence reliability. Of course, bringing bits of reporting together to reveal new truths is a venerable technique, but investigative journalism, even over 650 pages, has to get its facts demonstrably right.

Out of more than 1 000 footnotes in this book, over 1 200 are to newspaper reports, mostly given simply as newspaper per title and date. This leaves it to the hyper-curious reader to page through, for example, the 50+ odd pages of a typical issue of the Mail and Guardian in search of a specific reference.

Of the remaining 300 or so citations, about 10 percent are to “private sources”, which can mean anything, mixed in with unsourced commentary, references to interviews, and a handful of secondary works.

This method is full of potential pitfalls. Let’s examine an example. In his chapter on crime, Johnson writes that, at some unspecified date, Amnesty International “expressed shock at the high rate of illiteracy in the South African police force, as well as its reliance on torture and ill-treatment of prisoners, rather than detective work, to gain information.”

Tracing the source for this assertion back through the newspaper issue cited in the footnote, to an original Amnesty International report (which is not cited by Johnson, and which covers policing and human rights in the whole of southern Africa), we find the following: “In many countries, limited education and illiteracy is a significant concern, for example in the South African police force, which covers policing and human rights in the whole of southern Africa.”

But while much of the tale he tells is probably accurately reported, and it’s no surprise to discover that we have had - and have - corrupt politicians and incompetent civil servants, the story is unrelenting in its refusal to raise even a single cheer for our democracy.

This is not so much a grand narrative as a collection of cautionary tales held together by the theme of ANC corruption and venality. Johnson gives the game away by his tone, often dyspeptic and sometimes ungenerous. He is not much interested in balancing accounts. His title, for example, packs in the gloomy literary references - to Aldous Huxley’s ironically titled Utopian fiction of the 1930s and Paton’s classic and tearful South African novel. Chapter headings sometimes do the same - “Things Fall Apart,” for example, has obvious overtones of a coming Yeatsian apocalypse.

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