

Jaundiced view of new democracy

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SOUTH AFRICA'S
BRAVE NEW WORLD

RW Johnson
Allen Lane
REVIEW:
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RW 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.

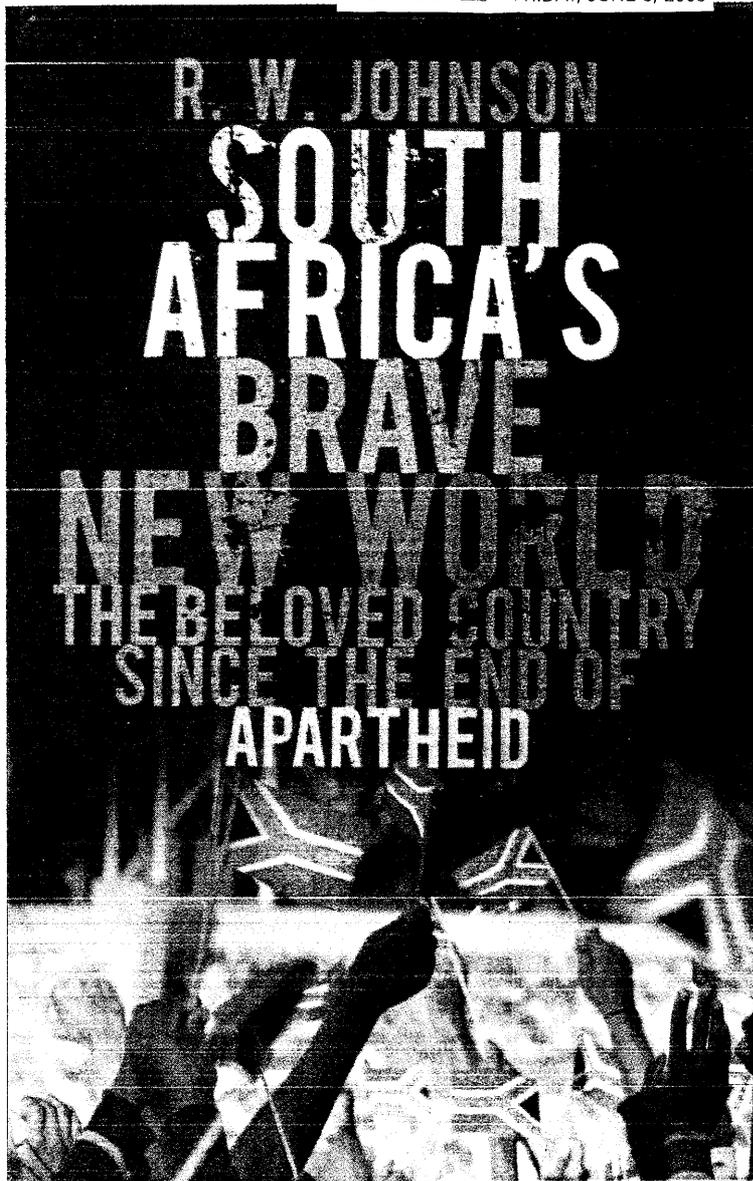
It is a critical account of the ANC's first years in power, organised as a political narrative from 1994 onwards, with thematic chapters embedded in the middle. These discuss such specific issues as Aids policy, the TRC, foreign policy (including Zimbabwe), black economic empowerment and language politics.

But angry and entertaining? This reader found it irritable and obsessive, as well as deeply pessimistic. It's also long and, in places, repetitive. This reaction might conceivably, of course, be attributable to the fact that Johnson is speaking a few uncongenial home truths and challenging some stubbornly-maintained assumptions about post-apartheid South Africa's rainbow political economy.

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.

In 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 Tshwete was Mbeki's "henchman", 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 dismissed 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 reportage 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 1 500 footnotes in this book, over 1 200 are to newspaper reports, mostly given simply as newspaper title and date. This leaves it to the hyper-curious reader to page through, for example, the 40-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 and the SFF in Namibia."

Thus, a technical report indicates "significant concern" with limited education and illiteracy taken together, in regional police forces generally. A journalist under pressure then pumps this up into a "high level of illiteracy" in the SAPS specifically. In Johnson's

hands, the rate of SAPS illiteracy is still high, and additionally, Amnesty International is now "shocked" by it, and by SAPS torture.

Did Amnesty express shock, then, at the use of torture by the SAPS (Johnson's second point)? In fact, the report condemns torture as widespread across the region, including South Africa, but also, as even the secondary newspaper report concedes, points to "positive aspects" of policing in South Africa.

These distortions are subtle, and probably don't in themselves invalidate Johnson's account. But sometimes, unfortunately, he gets it plain wrong.

He writes, for example, that "by 2000, there were major outbreaks of cholera, directly attributable to failures in sanitation and water supply".

"Such outbreaks had never occurred under apartheid."

Leaving aside the disturbing sub-text, this is inaccurate: South Africa has a long publicly-known history of cholera outbreaks, unsurprisingly during apartheid as well as at other times. Between 1979 and 1984, for example, there was an epidemic with outbreaks in Lebowa and the Transvaal gold mines.

Most seriously, however, Johnson apparently misunderstands the character of the victory over racial oppression - only a part of liberation - that was won in 1994. The deployment of demographic statistics in chapter 14 to show that white oppression of blacks is a recent phenomenon is unconvincing because it ignores the systemic character of colonial domination.

Johnson writes in a revealing passage that "the black man has found himself in a state of inferiority and subjection ever since whites arrived at the Cape. Now it is over, they want to build a new era..."

Liberation, however, if it means anything, is liberation not just for black men, but for all South Africans; not just for "them", however defined, but for "us" as well - also, importantly, however defined.

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