

Reviews

Wilmot James and Moira Levy (eds). 1998. *Pulse: passages in democracy-building: assessing South Africa's transition*. Cape Town: IDASA.

Conrad Barbeton, Michael Blake and Hermien Kotze (eds). 1998. *Creating Action Space: the challenge of poverty and democracy in South Africa*. Cape Town: IDASA and David Philip.

David Pottie

Both of these books are highly accessible to a wide range of readers. Both offer evaluations of the democratic transition in South Africa. Both focus on the institutional links between the state and civil society. And both suggest that South Africa's democratic record since 1994 is rather mixed. They do so, however, on quite different understandings of democracy.

The basic theme of *Pulse* is democratic consolidation as demonstrated through the activities of the executive, judicial and legislative functioning of the post-apartheid state. Hence, this collection of essays measures the institutional 'pulse' of South Africa's democratic transition.

The chapters in *Pulse* deal with Parliament's post-election performance, state ethics, executive accountability, the role of the Constitutional Court, policy development and service delivery and so on. Essentially, the emphasis throughout this book is on what has been termed procedural democracy.

In another work, Samuel P Huntington¹ advocates the use of the concept of procedural democracy as a definition of democracy because it 'provides a number of bench-marks – grouped largely along Dahl's² two dimensions – that make it possible to judge to what extent political systems are democratic, to compare systems, and to analyse whether systems are

becoming more or less democratic'. Robert Dahl's two dimensions are contestation and participation, basic prerequisites for a 'minimalist' definition of democracy. For Huntington it is therefore appropriate that this conceptualisation of democracy focus on elections as the essence of democracy since: 'Fuzzy norms do not yield useful analysis. Elections, open, free, and fair, are the essence of democracy'.

The IDASA volume follows in this tradition, taking us past the 1994 elections and arguing that it is time to pause and assess some of the benchmarks of South Africa's own procedural development. In this regard, the volume's editors opine that '*Pulse* is a modest effort to record, analyse and assess the progress and the problems of a democratic South Africa in its formative infancy. It is one record, not the record'. What follows is a sort of catalogue of institutional and legislative activities, service delivery indicators and statistical stock-taking of the activities of various government departments.

Given this brief, *Pulse* serves as a useful institutional report card on the state of the nation. For example, we learn that the provincial legislatures on average pass fewer than ten acts per year. The book also cites additional weaknesses and inadequacies in the parliamentary committee system, which at times has been under-resourced and/or under-used and as Sean Jacobs reminds us, neither the decision to close the RDP Office nor the introduction of the GEAR strategy were challenged by Parliament or the committees. Both of these policy announcements stood as executive decisions. This type of evidence is the strength of the book.

In response to these, and other noted weaknesses in South African democracy, the overall tone of the book is one of cautious celebration even as the country faces many challenges. More specifically, concepts such as vigilance, creativity, hard work, policy co-ordination and commitment inform the moral prescriptions that make up the chapter conclusions. This is the primary weakness of the book and one suspects that each author was instructed to offer the reader some 'practical' advice to take with them as they steel themselves against the challenges of democratic consolidation.

Creating Action Space takes us to a different plane of evaluation of democratic consolidation in South Africa. The emphasis here is on what might be called developmental or participatory democracy. The overall objective of the contributions to this volume is to establish a link between political and socio-economic justice in South Africa. A central theme throughout the book is a basic demand for ensuring that participatory

structures incorporate the interests of the poor and address their basic needs.

But what is 'action space'? The term refers to an evaluation that poor people have very limited ability to participate in the political process due to limited education, low income, unequal power relations and so on. Moreover, given these constraints, the poor are only likely to act if they feel that they have a high possibility of success. Thus, action space is the book's shorthand for the procedures, structures and dynamics that either facilitate or constrain participatory development.

In the absence of an effective link between political justice and socio-economic justice, Conrad Barbeton argues that, 'the mood on the ground is becoming more adversarial, more impatient with the slow delivery of most basic needs (water, sanitation, housing), the government's failure to support community development initiatives and the continued day-to-day experience of unemployment and poverty'. The culprits in this scenario are old elite interests, high-handed technocrats and expert consultants and those members of the ANC who try to intimidate or silence critical voices from civil society. The victim is participatory development.

In a separate work, Claude Ake³ argues along similar lines when he observes that the internal motivation for democratic transition in Africa largely lies with the failure of development strategies and the politics associated with them. Ake contends that the political context of post-colonial Africa places a premium on power and the institutional mechanisms for mediating political competition were lacking. As a result, African leaders operate from within a siege mentality and seek to downplay the influence of organisations from civil society on the established military or party hierarchy.

The contributions to *Creating Action Space* strike a warning of similar proportions – South Africa risks losing the rewards of the diverse participatory activities that informed elements of the liberation struggle. But while the contributors to *Creating Action Space* call for the active participation of the poor in political life, their understanding of the terms of that participation do not amount to an explicit call for a turn to class struggle. The balance of class forces and production processes that sustain poverty do not figure in this framework of politics.

Michael Blake's chapter comes closest to this formulation when he argues that the market-driven economic policy of GEAR will further erode the vision of participatory development set out in the RDP. But this style

of 'RDP versus GEAR' debate really takes us nowhere and Blake is closer to the mark when he calls for the reconstruction of a broad social movement that can press for the fundamental redistribution of resources and decision-making power. Andre Roux also pursues this theme as he examines the activities of the Community Liaison Unit of the Cape Town municipality. Roux looks at the institutionalisation of participation and finds that while the CLU is a promising example of a community development forum tapping into the local state, it lacks the necessary status, brief and mandate to carry out its functions fully. Other chapters explore similar dynamics facing community development forums and the consultative process with respect to constituencies such as farm workers and rural women, while other chapters tackle service delivery issues like health care and housing.

Creating Action Space therefore, tries to bridge the gap between the mainstream preoccupation with procedures and institutions of the state on the one hand, and models of participatory development that address basic needs on the other. Where *Pulse* deals with formal politics 'from above', *Creating Action Space* serves as the bookend, dealing with politics 'from below'. But more importantly than these tired metaphors, the two books provide a useful set of registers against which we can evaluate various definitions of democracy and democratic consolidation.

Notes

1. Huntington, SP (1991) *The Third Wave: democratization in the late twentieth century*, Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press.
2. Dahl, RA (1971) *Polyarchy: participation and opposition*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
3. Ake, C (1996) *Democracy and Development in Africa*, Washington DC: Brookings Institution.