At the heart of David Everatt’s well-researched and provocative book is the vexed question of white activists’ role in the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1950s. As Everatt makes clear, the white opponents of the regime influenced the ideological and organisational development of the Congress Alliance in a fashion disproportionate to their small numbers. Much of Everatt’s account is devoted to dismantling the myths that have surrounded this fact since the 1950s, particularly the idea of white or Communist dominance of the Congress Alliance. He convincingly shows that the CPSA and then SACP were far more heterogeneous organisations than some accounts suggest, and that the Congress of Democrats was neither born nor functioned as a front group for the Party. At the same time, Everatt demonstrates the importance of the ANC’s complex and frequently contentious relationship with a number of other white political organisations, particularly the Liberal Party. Given its commitment to peaceful social change during the 1950s, the ANC struggled to create alliances that would appeal to white public opinion while at the same time guarding the primacy of African political leadership. Everatt’s account suggests that this dilemma inspired much of the Congress Movement’s idealism and political creativity during this crucial decade – even if it was, at least in the short term, insurmountable.

Divided into nine chapters, Everatt’s book starts in the early 1940s and follows the evolution of white politics until the end of the 1950s. During the war years, the Smuts government’s international Alliances and the relaxation
of the pass laws created a sense of optimism and a temporary opening for a more liberal racial politics among sections of the white population. Smuts himself spoke at the opening of a ‘Soviet Friendship’ conference in 1943. At the same time, two developments began to reshape oppositional politics in very different ways: the CPSA’s decision to search for broad-based alliances with non-socialist organisations and the emergence of a more assertive ANC, especially the birth of African nationalism within the ANC Youth League. The repression of the 1946 mine workers strike and the adjourning of the Native Representative Councils marked a rightward shift in the racial policies of the governing United Party. As a result, liberals within the UP were caught in an untenable position. Increasingly marginal within their own party and mainstream white politics as a whole, they also faced a generation of African politicians who rejected their ‘guidance’ and were openly hostile to white leadership. With the election of the National Party and the removal of coloured voters from the electoral roles, a significant wave of white protest emerged centred on the Springbok Legion, Torch Commando, and former servicemen’s organisations, but this movement was quickly absorbed into the UP’s doomed 1952-3 election campaign and then dissipated.

During this same period, the CPSA was riven by internal debates over its strategic orientation. While a Cape Town-based minority argued for the primacy of class struggle, the Transvaal and Natal groupings increasingly emphasised the importance of the ANC and the primacy of national liberation, a position that was codified in the idea of ‘colonialism of a special type’. The abrupt disbanding of the CPSA in 1950 created intellectual space for the development of this debate not only among groups of former members but also among a broader milieu of white radicals. When the SACP was founded in 1953, its membership and leadership were based in the Transvaal, and the new organisation had reoriented decisively in favour of a strategic alliance with the ANC. By this time, the ANC was driving the course of events. As Everatt shows, the formations of both the Congress of Democrats and the Liberal Party were in direct response to the ANC-led Defiance Campaign, which radically shifted the terrain of oppositional politics. The campaign stole the initiative from the UP-Torch-Commando-Labour Party electoral bloc, but the near absence of white public support contributed to increasingly sharp expressions of anti-white sentiment among African demonstrators. In response, the ANC began to accept white volunteers for the campaign and called for the creation of a white organisation. Everatt provides valuable accounts of the 1952 Darragh Hall meeting (the first white meeting initiated
and addressed by Congress leaders), the ensuing formation of the Johannesburg Congress of Democrats, white debates over participation in a race-based organisation, and the launching of the South African Congress of Democrats as a national organisation.

The Defiance Campaign and the re-election of the National Party finally brought the crisis of liberal UP members to a terminus. In May 1953, the Liberal Party was formed, but under an older leadership who still embraced a qualified franchise, opposed the Defiance Campaign, and sought to appease the racist white electorate. Younger members, believing that the party’s key task was to win black support, immediately began to challenge these positions, and by 1956 they had transformed the leadership and direction of the organisation. Reconstructing these debates, Everatt demonstrates that the Liberal Party was not – as has often been asserted – simply a continuation of nineteenth century Cape liberalism. The constant exchanges (and competition) between Liberals and the Congress movement radicalised its younger members and led to the rejection of two ballasts of the older liberal tradition: a qualified franchise and opposition to extra-parliamentary action. As Everatt wryly notes, the Liberal Party endorsed a non-racial membership almost two decades before the ANC and many of its positions were more radical than the 1994 RDP. Some of the most interesting sections of this book concern the Liberal Party’s progress from the mid-1950s, especially in Natal where the organisation had its only influential black members and shared several senior members with the ANC.

*The Origins of Non-Racialism* is classic political history, straight-shooting, without any theoretical or methodological fuss. Nonetheless, it has some important insights for the writing of struggle history. First, Everatt treats region and South Africa’s variegated social landscape analytically. He grounds the differences in both Congress and Liberal Party policy in the racial and class dynamics of Natal, the Western Cape, and the Rand and then explores how these divergences ramified within the political organisations as a whole. This approach allows him to overcome the growing schism in the historiography between a hypostasized ‘national’ narrative based on a limited set of leading figures/major events and empirically rich, but often disconnected, local histories. Second, Everatt’s account skilfully portrays the range of political actors that the ANC was forced to take into account when developing its tactical and strategic outlook: the Liberal Party, the Springbok Legion, the South African Institute of Race Relations, the Black Sash, the Civil Rights League, to name but a few. The result is a more
contextualised and nuanced account of the Congress Movement’s evolution.

There are some drawbacks to Everatt’s approach as well. He makes no attempt to engage comparatively or theoretically with relevant scholarship from other contexts, for example the now considerable literature on Cold War civil rights politics. It is also rather surprising not to find any discussion of identity or the scholarship on ‘whiteness’ and ‘complicity’. Questions like economic and educational privilege, personal relationships, guilt and resentment, cultural differences, or interracial sex play no role in Everatt’s account – but they were certainly charged issues among many activists. The reduction of the political to the formal activities of liberation organisations is a characteristic gesture of postcolonial nationalist history, and Everatt tacitly assumes this definition. The racial framing of the narrative introduces some additional difficulties, particularly in the case of the Communist Party. There is a slippage between Everatt’s discussion of the ‘white radicals’ and the CPSA/SACP, creating the strong impression that white members drove the ideological and strategic direction of the party. If this was indeed so, it raises some difficult questions about the internal political life of the two organisations and the interactions between white cadre and the much larger number of African and Indian members. But it is also possible that Everatt’s privileging of the voices and roles of white communists in large part flows from the racially-circumscribed nature of his project. In either case, the important question of the intellectual and interpersonal relationships between activists from different racial backgrounds is not adequately explored.

The most tendentious chapter in the volume is number 3, ‘Multi-Racialism: Communist Plot or Anti-Communist Ploy?’ While conceding the CPSA promoted racially-distinct organisations in the 1940s, Everatt emphasises a 1950 internal report that called for their transformation into a single political organisation encompassing all race groups to pursue a working class programme. In contrast, he references comments by Anton Lembede endorsing limited cooperation between race-based organisations in order to argue that the Youth League endorsed the programme of ‘multi-racialism’, and then argues that the YL opposed ‘non-racialism’ because of its association with a class struggle politics. The reverse is probably closer to the mark. Whatever the CPSA discussed shortly before its dissolution, the reconstituted party made no attempt to create an above ground organisation in the 1950s, nor did it publically work towards the opening of ANC membership to all races. Moreover, the Youth League (and later Africanist) critique of the Communists did not centre on non-racialism or the Communists’
putative advocacy of class struggle. Instead, the Youth League argued that Indians and white communists were ‘pseudo-communists’ who were using the numerical preponderance of minority organisations within Congress structures to safeguard their privileges as ‘settler colonialists’. Nor was the ANC YL’s argument for cooperation between racial groups equivalent to ‘multi-racialism’ as it developed in the early 1950s. The YL/Africanists rejected all organisational structures within which the ANC received equal voting strength as parties representing minority groups. There was, as Everatt contends, a heavy dose of anti-communism and racism in the Youth League’s politics. But he goes too far in treating every manifestation of Africanist anti-communist sentiment as reflecting a reactionary, anti-minority position. There were certainly many legitimate reasons, domestic and international, for anti-Communism (or, at least, anti-Stalinism) in the 1950s.

If Everatt’s political history is both original and generally compelling, his approach to intellectual history is less satisfying. The promise of the book’s title – an explanation of the origins of non-racialism – remains largely unfulfilled. The reasons are several. In his introduction, Everatt makes the crucial observation that the ANC and its affiliated organisations have failed to define non-racialism beyond a vague sense of anti-racism or formal equality. How non-racialism was to be realised in post-apartheid South Africa and what it entails in practice were issues left vague, perhaps deliberately. But surprisingly, Everett fails to ask why this should be the case. If non-racialism was a core value of the Congress movement since the adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1956, why was it never the object of the kind of sustained theoretical reflection that occurred around issues like the ‘national question’ or ‘colonialism of a special type”? Does this not suggest that the history of the concept is more convoluted than Everatt and others concede, and that its centrality to the liberation struggle has been, at least in some respects, exaggerated?

A closer attention to terminology would have laid the ground for a more complex story. Everatt comments on the fluidity of terms such as non-racialism and multi-racialism in the 1950s, which were often used interchangeably. But in fact, neither of these terms was used widely within the Congress Movement before the very end of 1950s. Luthuli and others sometimes employed the word ‘multi-racial’ to describe the character of South African society, but in a merely descriptive sense. The first people who used non-racialism and multi-racialism with something like their current meaning were white intellectuals associated with the Liberal Party and its
newspaper Contact. Sobukwe and Jordan Ngubane (a crucial link between the liberal party and the Africanists) appear to have taken this vocabulary from the Liberal Party and then applied it to the ANC in polemical writings. In contrast there are several examples of ANC leaders asserting that the debate over non-racialism and multi-racialism was based on confusion and demagoguery. If the published writings are any guide, Luthuli only began using the term non-racial after the ANC/PAC split, in large part to convey that the ANC opposed ‘group rights’ – an issue that was left vague in ANC propaganda of the 1950s. The record for Mandela is similar. In other words, individual ANC leaders seem to have adopted the language of non-racialism after the organisation’s banning and reactively. It did not develop organically out of the debates over race and party structure of the 1950s, which, as Everatt recognises, remained unresolved at the time of the banning. Unfortunately, Everatt gives a rather cursory treatment of the late 1950s. The strengths of this book lie in its handling of the first years of the decade.

Like many historians of the liberation struggle, Everatt assumes a meaning for terms like non-racialism – in his case, a racially inclusive organisational structure – and then employs this lexicon anachronistically. In effect, this practice rewrites the discourse of the past so that it reflects the politics of a later period, thus introducing an inadvertent teleology at the level of narration. If Everatt had traced the debate over the relationship between the ANC and other political organisations in its own terms, he would have been forced to begin his story earlier and take account of the controversies regarding ‘non-European unity’ during the 1940s, both between Lembede and the Unity Movement and within the ANC over the alliance with the Indian Congresses. These debates set the intellectual framework for the disputes over white participation within the antiapartheid struggle. Hewing closely to the line of ANC orthodoxy, Everatt limits himself to remarking that the relationship between the ANC and other black organisations had been settled by the 1950s. In reality, the ANC’s cooperation with the Indian Congress remained as contentious (and in Natal maybe more so) as its relationship with white organisations. Everatt’s core insight stands: the question of minorities played a fundamental role in the organisational and ideological development of the ANC. But significant aspects of his account require emendation.