

Review

Adrian Guelke (2005) *Rethinking the Rise and Fall of Apartheid: South Africa and world politics*. Houndmills: Palgrave.

Laurence Piper

This book is the first in a series entitled 'Rethinking World Politics'. The intention of the series is 'to address the big issues in world politics in an accessible but original manner', and 'to transcend the intellectual and disciplinary boundaries which have so often served to limit rather than enhance our understanding of the modern world' (flyleaf). To my mind Guelke succeeds admirably in the first of these objectives, but less so with the second.

This book is an excellent introduction to most of the key debates around apartheid history. Guelke covers a remarkable range of debates, arranged mostly in chronological order and including: whether racial policy was imperial in origin or due to frontier prejudice; whether segregation was imported or home-grown; whether apartheid had a blue-print; whether Grand Apartheid modernised apartheid; whether the negotiated settlement of the 1990s was a choice or a necessity; whether the transition was 'miraculous' and the significance of the worldwide anti-apartheid movement.

In many ways Guelke's handling of these issues is exemplary. The reader is led through clearly organised, well presented and accessible arguments for and against a particular view, all related to Guelke's overall agenda: to show the significance of 'the international' for South African politics. Consequently many chapters are ideal starting points for those looking to begin enquiry into aspects of apartheid-era politics, especially undergraduate students, but really anyone new to the field. Indeed, to the extent that scholars of South Africa tend to focus on one or two of the debates, Guelke's book is of use to a wide readership.

For the reader looking for a more original take on the rise and fall of apartheid Guelke disappoints, not because he does not try, but because the attempt is not thoroughgoing enough. Guelke's central substantive claim is that 'apartheid was interconnected with the politics of the rest of the world in a much more profound manner than is simply indicated by the unpopularity of South African racial policy at the United Nations' (2005:xii). This is a potentially interesting claim, depending on what it is taken to mean. Are we dealing with arguments against the 'exceptionalism' of South African institutions, and by implication its politics, as advanced by Mamdani (1996), or are we dealing with a more historical revision which aims to 'up' the causal significance of various international players?

Clearly Guelke intends something of the latter. Thus at times he gestures towards the ideological influence of the west (Chapter Two, Chapter Four), at times to British imperial economic interests (Chapter 3), at times to international diplomatic pressure (Chapter 5, Chapter 8), international relations (Chapter 6), regional developments and relations (Chapter 7), and so on and so forth. Unfortunately, not only are there a plethora of variables listed under 'the international' but Guelke's argument is often implied rather than explicit, and at the end of many chapters I found myself still waiting for the decisive points in favour of some 'internationalist revision'. This problem is exacerbated by Guelke's stylistic tendency to slide from analysis to description in a way that reads well, but does nothing for analysis.

More substantively, I was surprised by the short shrift given to the 'race/class debate', an omission related to Guelke's limited consideration of economic questions in general. While, in the preface, Guelke does refer to the debate between liberals and radicals over the precise relationship between apartheid and capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s, little reference is made to this debate in the book itself, other than in the closing two pages of Chapter 7 on the shift from Vorster to Botha. To my mind this is a serious omission not only because the debate dominated South African studies for some time, but because it offers potential fuel for Guelke's cause. Disaggregating the relationship between capital and the political elite, and how this changed over time, might well help explain why at various times some international events and players seemed to make a difference and others did not.

Let me be clear, I think Guelke is on to something, not least given the impact of forms of post-national governance on South African policy and politics today, but his analysis runs together too many variables in an

unrelated way under the rubric of ‘the international’ to really amount to a convincing revision of our understanding of apartheid history. It also misses a couple of key economic points. Lastly, Guelke’s focus tends to be almost unilaterally on the impact of ‘the international’ on South Africa, and very seldom about the impact of South Africa on ‘the international’. Consequently, *Rethinking Apartheid* contains very little of import to non-South Africanists.

In sum, Adrian Guelke has written an excellent survey of most the key debates around apartheid history, presenting a wide range of issues and arguments clearly and accessibly. As a result, *Rethinking Apartheid* is a very useful text for South Africanists, especially those new to the field. As a substantive revision of our understanding of apartheid however, *Rethinking Apartheid* is probably better read as a challenge to take more seriously various international factors than a radical revision of South African history and politics.

Reference

Mamdani, Mahmood (1996) *Citizen and Subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Kampala: Fountain.