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Review: Lawrence Hamilton, Are South Africans Free? (2014)

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Lawrence Hamilton (2014), *Are South Africans Free?*, London et al.: Bloomsbury, ISBN 9781472534611, ix+155 pp.

The critical assessments 20 years into South Africa's democracy – often misleadingly referred to as the post-Apartheid era (much of the structural and mental legacy anchored and inherited under the racist minority regime remains alive and kicking) – amount to an impressive range of publications. They testify to the long tradition of civil society engagement, critical academic discourses, and the role public intellectuals have played since the early twentieth century in a country which for these and other reasons is not very typical relative to the continent's other societies and states. But what then is typical for Africa's diversity anyway?

This book adds to and complements a series of informed reviews, taking stock of the achievements or, rather, limitations of democratic South Africa since 1994. The author personifies the generation of scholars at several local universities who engage in a solid and reflective way with the mainly disappointing social and political realities that show the limits of so-called liberation rather than providing convincing evidence for true emancipation. The title of the book is therefore purely a rhetorical question, answered concisely in the first sentence of the back cover blurb: "Despite South Africa's successful transition to democracy and lauded constitution, political freedom for the majority of South Africans remains elusive."

The author drafted the monograph as a research professor of political theory at the University of Johannesburg and has since then become professor of politics at the University of the Witwatersrand in the same city. As he indicates in the Acknowledgements section, he benefitted from interactions with a wide range of fellow academics. This testifies to the exceptional state of academic affairs in this country, which boasts both an impressive range of knowledge production and – not least through several local academic and other publishing houses as well as social science journals and independent media – the means to disseminate the results and reach a wider audience.

What makes this monograph a bit different from several others is that it has not been co-published locally and that it is mainly a political-philosophical treatment of the notion(s) of freedom. Its arguments are not mainly empirically rooted nor are they based on a wide range of data (with the exception of some figures on pp. 107–117). While many other critical endeavours would use more statistics and empirical evidence to make the case for a robust critique of the lack of delivery, the strength of this undertaking lies on a more theoretical level; these are reflections that

correspond with and benefit from the author's other work on political theory and philosophy. This is also documented by the many references to such general literature, which goes far beyond the particular case of South Africa and thereby links the case study with wider discourse on rights, equality, and representation.

Hamilton maintains

“that existing, skewed forms of economic and political representation reproduce the power and interests of elites rather than generate economic opportunity and political power for all; that South Africa's electoral system implements the idea of proportional representation so literally that it undermines rather than instantiates meaningful representation and thus removes any meaningful political agency from ordinary citizens; and that existing macro-economic policy fails to address the dire conditions of poverty, inequality, unemployment, inadequate education, and thus the provision of freedom as power for all South Africans” (4).

One could argue that all these aspects have already been convincingly revealed and treated in depth by other studies. But none of these has applied the particular perspective offered by Hamilton, who reiterates that “the existing forms of economic and political representation reinforce [...] domination rather than act as means of rupturing [it]” (9).

His first chapter on political freedom offers a historical overview of the way democracy has evolved in South Africa. Chapter 2, on quality of life, concurs with other analyses that the living conditions for most ordinary people have not changed significantly since the formal end of Apartheid. Chapter 3 offers a critique of the system of political representation. Chapter 4 engages with what Hamilton calls “elite compromise” and argues that “the political elites in democratic South Africa have failed dismally to free their citizens from the shackles imposed by a distorted, racist, and barbaric colonial and apartheid history” (15). In conclusion, he argues that “poverty, inequality, rampant unemployment, poor public education, a distorted electoral system, and misguided macro-economic policy are the main reasons for the lack of freedom that still plagues South Africa,” and that this “can be explained by a mistaken understanding of freedom that fails to take account of the central importance of meaningful and empowering forms of representation” (16).

Not many of Hamilton's insights break new ground. But what is new is the form and depth of his explorations. This makes the book worth reading for those who engage more closely with South African realities today. Since the publication of the book, the political and economic realities of what has been dubbed “state capture” have manifested in, among

other things, various scandals: President Zuma's retirement village at Nkandla; so-called "Guptagate," which escalated in the obscure re-shuffling of the minister of finance; and the (mis)handling of the student protests by the government. These instances seem to demonstrate that the earlier critical assessments were very close to the reality we have witnessed in the meantime. Shortly after the traumatic Marikana massacre when workers on strike at the Lonmin platinum mine were killed in cold blood by the police, Hamilton suggested that a "unique focus on existing elite interests sacrifices future freedom and stability at the altar of short-term strategy and security" (14). One is tempted to add that the strategy has not worked very well. As we have learned since then, the unabashed forms of state capture have put even the country's short-term interests at risk. As the local government elections of early August 2016 documented (see the report in *Africa Spectrum* 2/2016),¹ voters have now started to respond to the evolving crisis, already identified by Hamilton two years ago.

- Henning Melber

1 Engel, Ulf (2016), Zupta's Next Nightmare: The South African Local Government Elections of 3 August 2016, in: *Africa Spectrum*, 51, 2, 103–115, online: <<https://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/afsp/article/view/980>>.