

Review: Dale McKinley, South Africa's Corporatised Liberation: A Critical Analysis of the ANC in Power (2017)

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Dale McKinley (2017), *South Africa's Corporatised Liberation: A Critical Analysis of the ANC in Power*, Auckland Park: Jacana, ISBN 9781928232322, 198 pp.

Written by one of South Africa's most activist scholars, this book provides a scathing critique of the record and character of the African National Congress (ANC) in government, its arrogation of power to itself, and its lack of trust in the revolutionary potential of the people. Its fundamental thesis is that the ANC turned its back on popular power (of which, in any case, it had always been suspicious) during the years of the negotiated transition to democracy in favour of collaboration with large-scale capital. The outcome of this, argues the author, is that "the ANC has become the key political vehicle, both in party and state form, of corporate capital; both domestic and international, both black and white, both local and national, and constitutive of a range of different 'fractions' of capital" (4–5). Indeed, both the ANC and the state it has taken over have become corporatised in form and content – that is, they have "imbibed the key features and practices of a corporation" (6), producing a major shift in the balance of forces away from the mass of workers and the poor. In turn, "the ANC's corporatised state is constitutive of a triangle of power: class, organisational and institutional." Where elements of the party or state do not bend to the dictates of the centralised power triangle, they are variously "attacked, marginalised, restructured or eliminated" (6).

The ANC, argues McKinley, was always the vehicle of an emergent African capitalist stratum seeking to gain access to the white-owned South African economy. In face of racist exclusion, it adopted a nationalist discourse and strategy to provide a sense of "de-classed" and collectivist struggle. This was underpinned by the two-stage theory of liberation it adopted via its alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP): Blacks were commonly oppressed, and their task was to fight for national liberation, with the ANC and SACP as their vanguard – hence the pursuit of the National Democratic Revolution, wherein the objective was to deracialise capitalism, as a precursor to a second stage of non-capitalist or socialist society.

This prepared the groundwork for the transition to democracy, which McKinley sees as having been rapidly hollowed out. It was not just that corporate capital found common ground with the ANC when it realised that popular power was rendering Apartheid unviable; nor was it just that the international context – notably the collapse of the Soviet Union – rendered it necessary for the ANC to cut a deal with their for-

mer adversaries. It was as much that the ANC's own choice of liberation strategy congealed into a corporatised path to power.

The ANC's statism – its vanguardist thinking which prescribed its historic role of conquering the commanding heights of the state and the economy – very quickly trumped popular power, with civil society being rapidly demobilised. In turn, Black Economic Empowerment became the major instrument for both legitimising the notion of a deracialised capitalism and vastly enriching a politically connected elite. Having gained the state, the ANC moved swiftly to adopt the main tenets of neo-liberalism and effectively handed over control of the economy to the large corporations and finance capital, which rapidly became dominant. “Trickle down” had disastrous consequences for the poor.

McKinley takes us through what is, after all, a fairly widely endorsed analysis via a particular metaphor designed to make his argument popularly accessible: Picturing twentieth-century South Africa as a house, constructed on foundations embedded in the systematic economic, racial, and political oppression of the black majority, the house came to be controlled by the National Party as political landlords, in conjunction with white capital as economic landlords. Following the negotiated settlement, the house was “liberated” with the ANC replacing the NP as the political landlords. It thereupon underwent significant refurbishing, but the economic landlords remained the same, while gradually upping the rent over the years. In turn, they were failing to see that the foundations were beginning to crumble. Nothing that the ANC was to do over the first two decades of its rule tackled the rotten structural foundations, and the main edifice of the house now reflects old and new prejudices, class and other divisions, and various inequalities. It is therefore left to the ordinary people who inhabit the house “to tear down the internal walls of fear, hatred and division, rip the heart out of those structural foundations and remake the house that the ANC has built” (141).

Suffice it to say here that the book progresses through chapters exploring how the ANC got into the house; how it laid down house rules via the corporatisation of economic and political power; how in turn it has divided and ruled the house via poor governance, corruption, and inequality; how it has guarded the house against opposition to its rule; and how it has reconstructed the house (despite a socially progressive constitution and much radical rhetoric) in a manner which has seen a return to “narrow, socially conservative and politically reactionary national, racial, class, ethnic, gender, sexual and religious identities and social relations” (137). All this has culminated in a house that is tottering on rotten foundations. Accordingly, the options available to the ordinary

people who inhabit the house are therefore either to change landlords and hope for a firmer disciplining of capital in the unlikely hope that the house can be fixed, or, second, and more realistically, to think of the best ways to break down the walls that separate them, mobilise in order to take ownership of the house, and finally engage collectively to rebuild the house from the foundation up so that it can become a place where all who live in it can be equally accommodated and live free, productive, and healthy lives (146). This will demand a struggle against capitalism and moving beyond it, for capitalism is never in favour of the majority, and cannot be reformed.

McKinley recognises the complexities of the second choice. However, he decries any previously prescribed solution based on the application of any particular ideological tradition: Any such trajectory would nullify the essence of a democratically framed, collectively conceived and constructed alternative. Any real alternative must be born out of “a journey of changed consciousness” and “practical struggles and experiences individually and collectively” (147). This implies that the making of a new democracy will almost certainly be messy, with no certainty of outcomes, albeit forged out of a willingness to rethink politics beyond established orthodoxies (148–149).

How well does McKinley’s analysis work? The short answer is that the book makes its case cogently, logically, and in a popularly accessible fashion, so it will prove a useful contribution particularly for undergraduates and those unfamiliar with South Africa. In an era when the combination of ANC corruption and neo-liberalism trickle-down theories are resulting in massive disillusion with the terms of the negotiated settlement, this book will receive a popular welcome. However, questions need to be raised about the very use of the term “corporatisation” of liberation and its notion that the ANC has in effect become, and acts as, a corporation. Whereas the house metaphor may be productive, the corporate metaphor for the ANC is misleading – after all, no sensible capitalist would buy shares in the ANC if it were to be launched on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange for fear that the board would simply walk off with the money! Furthermore, while the appeal to popular power and mobilisation is rousing, it leaves all sorts of questions hanging in the air: How would a participatory democracy be sustained? Perhaps even more crucially, how would a new democracy deal practically with large-scale corporate capital? We may deplore their overriding power and arrogance, their deceptions, and their abuse of human rights, but with the world as it is, it is unlikely that the large corporations – or, indeed, our need for their unprecedented capacity for production – will disappear.

This does not mean that a far more popularly based democracy than that which the ANC has foisted on South Africa is not attainable, but it does mean that we need practical engagement with the realities of the world as it is. Even so, while McKinley would acknowledge that he has raised questions whose answers we simply do not know in advance, he has provided a highly stimulating and valuable read.

- Roger Southall