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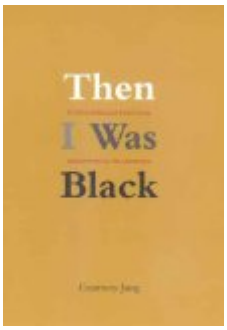
Courtney Jung. *Then I was Black: South African Political Identities in Transition.* New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 2000. x + 294 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-08013-1.



Reviewed by Abebe Zegeye

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Apartheid was a social and political system that created racial and ethnic boundaries amongst people living in South Africa. It was premised upon the concept of white supremacy and a hierarchical ordering of the races in this country. So, a book dealing with the implication of racialised identities in South Africa in the post-apartheid period is most welcome, if only to tell us how far we are moving towards realising what I call the common society model. To be sure, such a common society depends on more than speaking surreptitiously about the impact of social and political identities. Rather, we must also tackle the material inequities created and fostered by apartheid. In fact, my major criticism of this book is that it does not sufficiently stress this material backdrop, especially regarding building up segregated communities with very different life chances, opportunities and material opportunities. The current thrust of what is perceived as an Africanism within the ideological repertoire of the African National Congress arises precisely because according to all indices the African majority in South Africa is the most disadvantaged as a result of the differential impact of apartheid ideology and practice. This does not, however, deny the salience of the fact that most people who increasingly used the word 'black' to describe their affinity in an oppressed condition were denied privileges within the apartheid framework. But, as I suggest in this framework and as is implicit in Courtney Jung's framework, the insidiousness of apartheid (its 'divide and rule' approach to race and ethnicity) created different perceptions of the differential impact of apartheid upon the fortunes of the racial groups in South Africa.

In her book, *Then I was Black: South African Political Identities in Transition*, Courtney Jung sets out to analyse changing political identities in South Africa, especially since approximately 1975. To do this, she investigates topics such as the permanence of change, the construction of political identity, whiteness, and the politics of Zulu, coloured and Afrikaner identity. Finally, Jung looks at the political manipulation and conflict potential of identity when it is mobilised for ethnic, religious, linguistic and racial ends. In focusing on the manipulation of identities, Jung addresses the question of whether democracy is able adequately

to process politics in homogenous and non-homogenous societies such as South Africa.

With regard to Zulu identity, Jung claims that at least since the time of Shaka in the early nineteenth century, 'Zulu' has represented a specific ethnic category with which varying numbers of people identified at different times. The category has not always been salient and has usually not been relevant for most of the people living in KwaZulu Natal, the majority of whom are today called Zulus. Until the 1980s, for instance, Zulu identities coexisted easily with affiliation to the African National Congress (ANC). Inkatha, the political party of the Zulu homeland, maintained close links to the liberation struggle and the ANC, even while claiming to represent the 'Zulu nation'. Thereafter, although Inkatha claimed - and still claims - to unite all Zulus under a common ethnic identity, it was successful only among a stable rural majority and a shifting urban minority. But, the United Democratic Front (UDF), the ideological successor of the then-banned ANC, formed an anti-Zulu identity and was constituted within the context of a war against Inkatha, a party that identified itself as Zulu nationalist.

As for whiteness and Afrikaner identity, Jung uses survey results to demonstrate that white people's political identities were neither stable nor ethnically based in the 1980s. Both Afrikaans and English speakers switched political parties with unprecedented frequency, while Afrikaners were divided along ideological and demographic lines, and attitudes towards the major tenets of apartheid shifted rapidly and substantially. Since 1990, the political salience, meanings and boundaries of 'Afrikaner' identity have remained indeterminate and fluid and white identities generally remain in flux. For Jung, it is impossible to predict whether Afrikaner identity will be repoliticised as South Africa attempts demographic consolidation.

Coloured identity is no more salient politically in the immediate post-apartheid era (since the advent of the 1990s) than it was in the previous decade, according to Jung. The political identities of so-called 'coloured' people are multiply constituted and mostly not racialised. In response to incentives generated by post-apartheid political institutions, under constraints imposed by prior ideological commitments, political elites trying to garner support among coloured people do so by mobilising a variety of identities, but none has emerged as more successful than the others. Colouredness as yet contains no dominant political meaning and operated in 1999 within a substantially different range of possibilities than it did in 1989.

Jung claims that the only way to explain the change and difference that becomes evident on close inspection of politically mobilised ethnicity and race in South Africa is to complicate the story of the construction of political identity. The argument that 'states made race' may describe broad and sweeping historical trends with accuracy. But, the image that emerges is one of a highly determinate state and overdetermined identities. Democracy risks obsolescence if it operates only, or best, in homogenous societies. If ever there were homogenous societies, they are disappearing fast, Jung contends. Moreover difference does not rely on subjective conditions. Difference is the norm and differences on politicised lines of ethnicity, race, language and religion are practically universal.

Tracing the origins and behaviour of political identities is crucial to conceiving the place and possibilities of race and ethnicity in politics. Like other identities, ethnicity and race take many forms and conceal many journeys. If the material, organisational and ideological frames of voters continue to shift, South African politics should remain fluid enough to support the institutionalised uncertainty democracy requires.

What I would like to correct in this book is the claim that apartheid always used the notions of raciality and especially those of ethnicity. Certainly with the installation of the Nationalist party

a discourse on race and racialism was instituted in South Africa, but since the Verwoerdian era race and ethnicity have been mobilised to serve the ideological and political interests of the white minority government. Ethnic identities and even the concept of ethnicity was not yet relevant in earlier periods of South African history. This certainly does not mean that racial and other cultural differences were not perceived, but I would argue that they were then not yet available for the reconstruction of the country's social fabric.

Essentially, Jung's question involves an interrogation as to whether, given the salience of racial identities and ethnic mobilisation in South Africa, a constitutional and liberal polity can be entrenched in South Africa. Yet, her answer to this key question remains ambiguous and contradictory, given statements to the effect that individuals in South Africa are not 'beholden to the ethnic drum beaten by ethnic entrepreneurs'.

From this book, one gets the impression that South Africans live in racial and ethnic categories and that these identities continue to be mobilised for political ends in the new South Africa. In contrast, I would argue that Jung should focus on the impact of segregation in creating a pervasive sense of status incongruity between the various South African racial and ethnic groups, which creates a perception of threatened mobility chances for various groups. This is particularly true for her subjects, the Afrikaners and coloured people, many of whom perceive the new dispensation as threatening their place in South Africa. For the coloured people this is especially true in the Western Cape where as a result of labour preferences under apartheid they were somewhat cushioned from the harsher treatment meted out to Africans. But, this is not as important as the fact that coloured people and Africans in the Western Cape lived in very different communities which were characterised by segregation and differential opportunity structures. This is also true for whites in the Western Cape. Africans have always been at the bottom of the ladder in this province and attempts by the Nationalist Party to mobilise coloured communities and elites to defend centuries of white privilege are attempts at manipulating palpable differences in opportunities and life chances in the Western Cape. While political organisations and mobilisable ideologies are important, it is the perceptions of who the new order is benefiting that is the crux of the problem. Coloured and white people, including English speakers, perceive themselves to be at the receiving end of the South African transformation to a new non-racial dispensation. A focus on addressing the inequities experienced by Afrikaners does not contradict the non-racialism of the present government, which Jung continually blames for fostering an Africanist agenda. This shortsighted view precludes an adequate analysis of change in South Africa at present, as the government has often claimed that its long-term aim is to redress inequity.

Another shortcoming of this book is its failure to integrate its analysis with the notion of class in present-day South African politics and society. Various important works in this area have warned of the increasing importance of class differences in South Africa across all communities. In this sense, South Africa is normalising domination according to the western capitalist democratic model. Even amongst urban Africans, there is increasing class inequality and with the mushrooming of shacks in the country the conflicts and struggles of the new South Africa have taken on a clear class nature. Of course, race interpenetrates in these struggles as a result of historical discrimination. But Jung does not grapple with this reality in the new South Africa, perhaps because she is beholden to a notion of an ethnically divided South Africa however much she wants to argue against it. In this way, Jung falls into the trap of analysing social relations in South Africa in terms of static and reified concepts in spite of her own explicit warning against reification. Reified analyses obviously do not do justice to what she terms

'the potentially unstable and permeable boundaries of the group'. A recent study of affirmative action in South Africa depicts coloured males to have been more selected for professional positions in organisations in South Africa under apartheid than African men. The current administration in the Western Cape struggles with the notion of the deracialisation of the Western Cape precisely because the elites who form the subject of Jung's book are against the Africanisation of the public sector in the Western Cape.

I would like to end this review with a story. Yesterday, while sitting in a cafe in Pretoria, a few 'coloured' men were drinking and playing a card game and a Venda from Messina offered to sit with me. A while later, a 'coloured' man asked to join us and started a conversation on different peoples in Pretoria and how to recognise them. The Venda became angry at his classifications of people and started to argue with him on the question of his racial identity. He asked how the 'coloured' saw him as Indian. Was it because of his curly hair? The 'coloured' man feeling somewhat cornered tried to turn the situation around and demanded that the Venda categorise him. The Venda said he in South Africa would be called a coloured. This angered the 'coloured' man, who insisted that he can not be classified. Whereupon, the Venda man seized the opportunity to remind the coloured man of his error of classification: that despite his curly hair, he is a Venda and definitely not an Indian.

Courtney Jung's book, in failing to capture the dynamics of racial and ethnic identity in South Africa, also fails to capture the dynamics of racialisation and ethnicisation in the everyday life of South Africans. The topic is important but we need to move away from post-cold war analogies of ethnicisation and start to rebuild integrated South African communities as a move beyond apartheid. South Africa is not beholden to its past and with the massive current social changes worldwide it will not remain so tied to its past.

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