

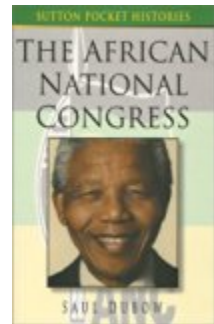
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Saul Dubow. *The African National Congress*. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2000. xiv + 114 pp. \$9.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7509-2193-0.

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Provocative Introduction to ANC

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It is very difficult to compress the history of the ANC into a book of just over 100 pages. Inevitably one is unable to qualify sufficiently and brevity sometimes forces one to lose texture and nuance. What one includes and excludes from the text is also likely to be controversial. Within these constraints, Saul Dubow broadly makes sense of and provides a provocative interpretation of the development of the ANC. One of the strengths of the book is its illustration of continuities within moments of rupture and ruptures within periods of apparent continuity. Dubow repeatedly refers to the diverse character of the ANC manifested in regional specificity and peculiarities. These have persisted throughout its history and indeed, many of the forms that division takes in the organisation today relate to its regional bases and the distinct character of organisational history and culture in these regions. Many of these differences go back to the nineteenth century and continue to have some salience today, especially in a province like the Eastern Cape.

>From the outset Dubow sets out to debunk “nationalist teleologies.” “History is apt to confer a retrospective sense of certainty and inevitability on the past, and to occlude the role of contingency and fortune in events” (p. xiii). He alludes to Nelson Mandela having been more or less forgotten by the world for some decades after his incarceration. Newspapers of the early 1970s scarcely mentioned the ANC and, when they did, often treated it interchangeably with the PAC. There was a sense, in

the public domain, that the ANC no longer existed inside the country. Insofar as this has led some to conclude that the ANC practically ceased to exist, this may have been over-stated, without sufficient account being taken of that which was not visible. Many of those who were banned or banished did conduct ANC political education amongst young people, though the conditions of the time required great secrecy. Research that I have undertaken confirms a view—which, nevertheless, must be cautiously advanced—that although the ANC did not initiate the 1976 Soweto Rising, seasoned veterans in the townships were indirectly influential on many of the black consciousness (BC) people and the direction of the rising. One example of this interpretation comes in an interview I conducted with Nat Serache in August 2002. Serache interacted as an ANC underground worker with the late Joe Gqabi.

Dubow is correct, however, that there was nothing certain about the ANC’s road to victory in 1994. Statements of the organisation repeatedly indicate a sense of inevitable unfolding of history towards ultimate success. The most obvious is the ubiquitous slogan “Victory is certain!” Dubow cites a variant of this from the ANC Youth League (p. 36). Likewise, Michael Harmel once wrote that the establishment of the ANC was an historic and courageous action “which *inevitably* led to its development into a fighting liberation movement aiming at the revolutionary conquest of people’s power” (my emphasis).[1] A reading of numerous periods of ANC history shows there was nothing inevitable about this (p. 72)

and survival of the organisation was sometimes in doubt (p.xiv). Unfortunately the text is marred by factual errors, which in at least one case has the effect of concealing important processes. After referring to divisions within the trade union movement between “workerists” and “populists” (pp. 85-6), Dubow speaks of the formation of COSATU, “by unions sympathetic to the Congress movement” (p. 86). In reality, the formation of COSATU was a long and difficult process involving protracted negotiations between different tendencies within the trade union movement. It is precisely the coming together of the so-called workerist and populist tendencies in one trade union federation that differentiated COSATU from what may have been the dominant “workerist” tendency in FOSATU. The choice of the word “Congress” in those times usually indicated allegiance to the “Charterist” position of the ANC and UDF. But there was not an unproblematic and uncontested adoption of a Charterist direction within COSATU. Even at the level of the early office bearers, elements of compromise between the different tendencies can be seen. Jay Naidoo, the first General Secretary of COSATU, in fact came from what would have been described as the “workerist” tendency, while the assistant General Secretary, Sydney Mufamadi, came from the General and Allied Workers Union (GAWU), a union that was very small in numbers but large in Congress and Marxist theory. The transition towards a “Congress position,” including adoption of the Freedom Charter, was, like all else, not inevitable, although it may have coincided with the emergence of a large number of black trade unionists as leaders of the unions as well as black “organic intellectuals” within the union movement. In the early years when there was the workerist/populist debate, white intellectuals in the unions primarily represented the former tendency. Many of these had been schooled in a version of Marxism that emphasised class but was contemptuous of the national struggle. Their relative displacement through the emergence of worker leaders and intellectuals helped sway the new federation towards a “Congress position.”[2] There had developed in the mid-1980s a number of black worker leaders with the authority and command of theory to contest the “workerist” intellectuals who had been so important in the earlier period. But this was also a period of community struggles and these worker leaders could not easily dissociate themselves from their children who were being shot and tear gassed, while many of them endured repeated acts of state and vigilante violence.

Repeatedly Dubow refers to a choice for the ANC and UDF between being socialist or social democratic, and

this implies that these represent the present or future character of the ANC (pp. 87, 106). Some of these characterisations may be valid. Yet they are not obvious and need to be argued. It also needs to be asked whether such labels end up capturing one aspect while obscuring other elements of the organisational character from our view. Personally, despite substantial and varied experience in the UDF and ANC, I have never heard anyone argue for social democracy within either organisation, contrary to Dubow’s remarks (p. 87) nor for the characterisation of the ANC as social democratic, though there were debates around social democracy in other forums such as the columns of the *South African Labour Bulletin* in the early 1990s. It may well be that what the ANC is today constitutes a social democratic movement. But it is significant that despite extensive assistance from the Nordic countries, there was no substantial ideological input in favor of social democracy within the ANC itself (though again, some input may have been made via the Swedish-South African trade union connections). While the books of Progress Publishing on Soviet Marxism-Leninism circulated widely in the camps, and illegally within the country, I never encountered or heard of anyone reading social democratic literature. Regrettable or narrow-minded that may have been—or it may have related to the insurrectionary climate. It nevertheless indicates something about the lack of diffusion of social democratic thinking.

It may be possible to sustain an argument that the ANC has been transformed into a social democratic party. But if that is the case, it has not been as a result of rigorous debate within the organisation. Rather it would have been the result of some imperceptible process of the absorption of ideas that were previously not assimilable.

Another reason that this label does not apply to the ANC is that the discourse of the ANC, even in 2002, still remains a strange mix of Brezhnevite Marxism-Leninism and conservative macro-economic policies, neither of which could be said to constitute social democracy. The language for defending privatisation and attacking leftist opponents within the organisation is through invocation of classics of Marxism-Leninism.

Perhaps the more important question is whether it is in fact correct to say that the ANC is or has been social democratic at particular moments. Let us begin by saying that the organisation’s self-characterisation continues to be as a national liberation movement, pursuing a path of “national democratic revolution.” There is certainly contestation about the meaning of these terms, and especially concerning the character of “national demo-

cratic revolution.” I am not sure that there is as much difficulty entailed in characterising a national liberation movement. It may have core characteristics that can be clearly defined, that distinguish it from a conventional political party.[3]

Within the characteristic features that we may ascribe to national liberation movements, as with other organisations, there are many variations. They may manifest qualities that represent a form and content of democracy that can be both narrower and broader than that found in social democratic parties. Moreover, this may vary at different phases of a particular movement’s existence. For example, the period of the 1980s, when a broad and direct form of democracy was practised, is quite different from the present, when parliamentary democracy coexists with the resuscitation of democratic centralism in the ANC.

Related to this is Dubow’s failure to recognise the continuity as well as rupture in the organisational character of the ANC today. Practising his own version of teleology, Dubow suggests that an inevitable task for the ANC is to turn itself into a political party (p. 102). But is that the case? Is there an inevitable trajectory from national liberation movement to political party? And if there is, what does it imply for internal democracy? Some people are suggesting this is the case with inevitable modalities that curtail internal debate, mass participation, and so on. Again, this may in fact be a process in motion. If so, is it being resisted and how? Is it desirable or not?

Others argue that the struggle for liberation was intended to achieve more than representative democracy, without in any way detracting from the fundamental character of that gain in its own right. But they also look for participatory and direct democracy. There were substantial experiences in direct popular democracy during the 1980s (and even earlier in the peasant risings documented by Govan Mbeki). These experiences of *popular power*, to which Dubow gives little attention *in these terms*, have left a deep impression on that generation of activists. Many may have expectations of a more direct role for themselves than is provided by the periodic act of voting.

In some respects, Dubow lacks a paradigm which can explain the developments he describes. He is fairly clear that the rise of the ANC Youth League was partly conditioned by the earlier organisational work of Dr. Xuma (p. 20), and it may be said, even earlier by Reverend Calata after a 1936 ANC conference resolution.[4] But he does

not draw organisational conclusions of this kind in relation to the failure of BC. The conversion and absorption of BC members and leaders into ANC is not adequately explained (for example on p. 83). One of the reasons, which needed to be articulated, that BC may not have been sustained is because it lacked grassroots organisation and consisted of formations with intellectuals predominating. That is why, even today, the BC intellectuals can be found in over-supply in many of the commercial newspapers, but with little organisational presence on the ground. The BC was absorbed into ANC camps and UDF structures because these two *had* structures, not loose debating groups, which is important to recognise. Certainly BC and Africanism (the latter particularly) have areas of the country where they enjoy support, but it is not clear to what extent this reflects organisational strength.

I do not have the space here to examine adequately an issue that needs more examination than Dubow gives—that is, to what extent BC and Africanism represented new strands of thought or merely led to the formation of new organisations. Can one not make an argument to the effect that BC and Africanism represented ideological trends which have always found expression within the ANC? I do not feel a messianic zeal to prove that ANC always embraced Africanism and BC, but there is definitely some evidence for this view in the early days, the period of the Youth League, and today. I am aware that scholars like Gail Gerhart would argue that the ANC did not represent “orthodox African nationalism” and that this was only found outside.[5] But should we not also be considering Africanism as a trend within the ANC—now and in the past—as well as how it coexists with other ideological trends within the ANC?

Finally, the book also suffers from a certain terminological looseness or inconsistency. For example on one page the early ANC is referred to as *petit-bourgeois* or *aspirant proto middle class* (p. 3) and on the next page as an “*African bourgeoisie*” (p. 4). I would like to know on what basis the latter characterisation was determined. Communist Party formulations are never directly quoted (possibly for reasons of space); rather they are often incorrectly conveyed, for example, the independent native republic is expressed as entailing a “*bourgeois nationalist revolution*” (p. 13) and the desire for “*true socialism*” (p. 54). Yet “*true*” is an adjective from which Communists would shrink in describing the type of socialism they pursued at that time. It would be interesting to know where or whether these formulations are found in actual Communist Party documentation. Also I am not

sure where the evidence lies for the assertion that Communist and Africanist trends coalesced around the concept of "African socialism" (p. 15). My sense is that this concept has always had very little currency within the ANC and none whatsoever within the Communist Party.

Despite these differences, which may suggest wider disagreement than I feel, I enjoyed reading this book and recommend it as a provocative introduction.

Notes

[1]. A. [Michael Harmel] Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years: The South African Communist Party, 1921-1971* (London: Inkululeko Publications, 1971).

[2]. Sakhela Buhlungu, "Rebels without a Cause of Their Own: The Contradictory Location of White Of-

ficials in Black Unions, 1973-2000," unpublished seminar paper presented to Rand Afrikaans University Development Studies Seminar Group, 15 March 2002. See [\\$>\\$](http://general.rau.ac.za/sociology/BuhlunguPaper.htm)

[3]. See Mona N. Younis, *Liberation and Democratization: The South African and Palestinian National Movements* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[4]. Peter Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism* (London: C. Hurst, 1970), p. 257.

[5]. Gail M. Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

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