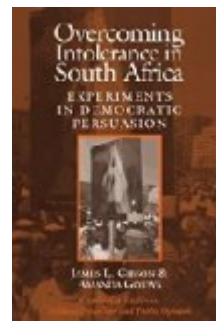


James L. Gibson, Amanda Gouws. *Overcoming Intolerance in South Africa: Experiments in Democratic Persuasion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xvi + 262 pp. \$66.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-81390-7.



Reviewed by Ineke van Kessel

Published on H-SAfrica (June, 2004)

This book opens with a pessimistic assessment of the prospects for liberal democracy in South Africa and also ends on a note of doom and gloom. The authors note that South Africa has many of the characteristics typically associated with the failure of democratization. Widespread illiteracy, extreme socio-economic inequality, rigid racial and ethnic cleavages are not the most promising ingredients for a successful transition to democracy. "The prognosis for successful democratization in South Africa generated from existing theoretical and empirical models is guarded at best, and more realistically, is poor. If South Africa succeeds in establishing a thoroughly democratic political system, it will do so against all odds, and its success will be virtually unprecedented in the history of the development of democratic government throughout the world" (p. 4).

Ten years after its first democratic elections, South Africa has no shortage of external examiners who are, at times, overly zealous in pointing out the failings of the fledgling democracy. The authors of this book have stacked the cards in such a way that the candidate is bound to fail.

James Gibson and Amanda Gouws have detected a nearly fatal flaw: South Africans are very intolerant, and black South Africans are the most intolerant by far. However, in their research experiments, they established that the beliefs, values and attitudes of ordinary South Africans can be influenced by arguments or authorities. But, unfortunately, it proved easier to convert tolerance to intolerance than vice versa. Intolerance proves much more resistant to change but inducing tolerance, or at least acquiescence, is not impossible.

Gibson and Gouws set themselves a twofold aim: to assess the prospects for successful democratization and, most importantly, "to assess levels of political tolerance and intolerance, and to determine the causes, consequences, pliability, and temporal stability of these important political attitudes" (p. 12). This is done by means of two representative surveys among some three thousand respondents. It is important to bear in mind that the surveys took place in 1996 and 1997, and that the book was only published in 2003. The conclusions are presented as if these findings still held true in 2003.

The authors conclude that intolerance is widely accepted within all segments of the South African population. They point out that South Africa is a deeply divided society in which groups perceive each other as highly threatening, with the threat being immediate and real rather than abstract and hypothetical, as it is in the United States, where their methodology for measuring intolerance was developed. Readers are reminded that race is not the only cleavage marking South African society, a caveat the authors themselves conveniently forget in most of the rest of the book. Tolerance is defined as "the willingness to allow all groups, irrespective of their political viewpoints, to compete for political power through legal and peaceful means" (p. 41).

Following Lijphart, Gibson and Gouws state that group identities based on ascriptive characteristics such as race or ethnicity generate permanent majorities and minorities and are, therefore, a most unwelcome state of affairs for democracies (p. 75). On the basis of their survey, they establish that race is the primary social identity for a vast majority of South Africans. Some 45 percent of African South Africans identified with the categories "African" or "Black." However, over half of the whites, coloreds and Asians preferred the term "South African" as their primary or secondary identity. A noteworthy 35 percent of Africans also opted for the label "South African" as their primary or secondary identity (p. 77). This is not a bad start for a new democracy that only two years before had been recreated from a white-ruled state and a patchwork of ten tribal Bantustans. Nevertheless, in the remainder of the book, respondents are only identified by the four racial groups enshrined under apartheid: Africans, whites, coloreds and Indians. No allowance is made for the fact that people have multiple identities. Racial and ethnic identities are no doubt salient in South Africa, but they are surely modified by class, gender, religion, generation, etc. However, the survey questionnaire left the respondents precious little choice. Apart from

race and ethnicity, the only other identities on offer were Christian or Muslim. Subsequently, in the conclusion, the authors confess to being "impressed--and perhaps depressed--by the powerful role of race in this analysis" (p. 218). This seems to be a case of output being determined by input.

Respondents were also asked to express their views about a variety of competitors for political power. Two-thirds of all categories of South Africans (and 84 percent of Africans) rated the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) as the most hated group. Again, this would seem a reason to rejoice at the common sense and democratic disposition of a large majority of South Africans, who apparently share a common hatred of a crude white supremacist doctrine, that moreover is associated with ugly violence against blacks. But the authors manage to misconstrue the AWB as a political party vying for political power by legal and peaceful means.

The AWB has never contemplated participating in elections. The authors do not mention that the AWB tried to sabotage the constitutional process and the 1994 elections by crashing a car into the conference center at Kempton Park in an attempt to bully the negotiators. AWB members were found guilty of placing bombs in polling stations and at taxi ranks on the eve of elections. They embarked on an armed invasion in Bophuthatswana in order to use this Bantustan as a staging ground for violent attempts to undermine the democratic process, shooting randomly at passersby. So much for legal and peaceful means in the contest for political power. Granted, the authors do admit that the AWB is extremist.

The second most hated group, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), is in their judgment "far from extreme. It is one of the primary competitors for political power in South Africa" (p. 49). Again, there is no mention of the large-scale violence unleashed by the IFP on the eve of the 1994 elections. IFP leader Buthelezi held the elections--and the future of South Africa--to ransom by pos-

ing a never-ending sequence of demands and refusing, almost until the very last moment, to register his party for the elections. He held the democratic process hostage with threats of secession and civil war. Over half of the respondents rated the IFP as "extremely disliked." Bearing in mind that the surveys were conducted in 1996, this is hardly surprising, as images of violence were still fresh in people's memories. Interestingly, even a majority of Zulu respondents (58.1 percent) put the IFP among their most-disliked groups, compared to about 85 percent of other Africans. Again, that would seem a reassuring outcome: at issue is not a hatred of Zulus but a loathing of the IFP's politics. Next on the most-disliked list is the National Party, followed for some inexplicable reason by homosexuals, who arouse almost one percent more hatred than Tony Leon's Democratic Party (22.7 percent and 21.9 percent respectively).

In this context, what should really be considered surprising is that South Africa, after these elections, was ruled for two years by a Government of National Unity, in which the ANC, IFP and NP managed to find enough common ground to work out a final constitution and to establish a fairly effective administration. Homophobic sentiments did not preclude a constitution that is widely acclaimed as a model in terms of the protection of gay rights.

Having established a ranking of most-hated parties, respondents were asked whether they would allow their most-hated party to stage street demonstrations in their own neighborhood, a non-violent demonstration, of course. "Obviously, democratic tolerance requires that all groups be permitted to organize, to proselytize others, and to attempt to control the government" (p. 56). The outcome is unambiguous: South Africans tend to be quite intolerant. Not surprisingly, they tend to be more intolerant when they feel threatened.

The authors emphasize that their research findings ought to be situated in the context of South Africa, but they then consistently ignore

their own advice. Trying to picture the AWB staging non-violent street demonstrations in Soweto defies the imagination of this reviewer.

The authors' democratic ideal is a market-place of ideas, where the traffic is determined by buyers and sellers only. Anything goes, including parties that explicitly aim to destroy democracy (p. 129). This is a twisted concept of tolerance and democracy. Surely, most liberal democracies impose some rules on the market-place of ideas, such as a ban on hate speech and on advocating violence. Calls for genocide have no place in this market-place. Do the authors really believe that the prospects for democracy in post-war Europe were poor because countries recently liberated from Nazi occupation banned Nazi parties and Nazi propaganda from the market-place of ideas?

For the authors, democracy equals an open market for ideas. In the minds of many black South Africans, the sequence probably looks more like democracy--majority rule--the end of apartheid. Therefore, parties that aim to destroy democracy by implication would probably want to reimpose apartheid. Can blacks really be expected to freely allow for parties that would relegate them once again to the status of inferior beings on the margins of society? Indeed, certain ideas are not to be tolerated. Democracy deserves to be defended rather than surrendered to anti-democratic forces.

Throughout the book, the authors grapple with the "enigma" emerging from the surveys that a group can be considered a threat while it is not perceived as powerful (pp. 212-213). There is nothing puzzling about this. In my experience, "powerful" has a positive connotation among black South Africans: it is an adjective denoting admiration. I have never heard a black South African describe Eugene Terre'Blanche as "powerful." But as an election observer in Rustenburg in 1994, I had ample opportunity to witness how Africans felt threatened by the AWB's gun-toting parades. Neither the AWB nor the IFP will ever

achieve power at a national government level: their power-base is clearly circumscribed. But they have proven themselves capable of unleashing extreme violence.

The authors make no allowance for any cultural differences in understanding. They employ "powerful" as a neutral term. Indeed, they make no allowance for any set of values other than their own. Communalism is seen only as an impediment to liberal individualism, not as a cushion that helps people survive in times of harsh repression and deprivation.

No attempt is made to explore the motives behind tolerant or intolerant views, apart from the general observation that people tend to be more intolerant when they feel threatened. Are poor people more tolerant than the rich? Are women more tolerant than men? Are educated people more tolerant than the uneducated? Are urban dwellers more tolerant than rural folks? Are old people more tolerant than the young or vice versa? The questions are not even asked, as the researchers are exclusively focused on race.

Remarkable statements abound throughout the book. Here is a sample of the more extraordinary ideas: South Africa has little wealth (p. 42); Khoi-Khoi are commonly referred to as "Hottentots" (p. 36); the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging is a mainstream political party (p. 28); and empirical evidence shows that many Africans oppose the NP because of its opposition to apartheid (p. 28)!

There are good reasons to be concerned about the future of democracy in South Africa. The ANC tends to stifle internal dissent and there is no viable opposition in sight that could conceivably oust it from the seat of power. Parts of South Africa are governed as a de facto one-party state and many South Africans are wrestling with the concept of a "loyal opposition."

But there is also good reason to marvel at the willingness of a large majority of black South Africans to build an inclusive society, foregoing the temptation to retaliate for decades, even cen-

turies, of exclusion and white intolerance. In view of South Africa's history, black South Africans have displayed a remarkable degree of tolerance. Critical evaluations of South Africa's performance and prospects ought to be based on reasonable criteria. South Africans--and black South Africans in particular--deserve credit for their ongoing attempts to build an inclusive, more equitable, democratic state--against all odds, indeed.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Ineke van Kessel. Review of Gibson, James L.; Gouws, Amanda. *Overcoming Intolerance in South Africa: Experiments in Democratic Persuasion*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9482>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.