

REVIEW ARTICLE

Entangled oligarchies: structure, agency and rent seeking in South Africa

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Anthony Butler, *Cyril Ramaphosa: the road to presidential power*. Woodbridge: James Currey (hb £45 – 978 1 84701 229 6). 2019, xvi + 496 pp.

Steven Friedman, *Prisoners of the Past: South African democracy and the legacy of minority rule*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press (pb US\$20 – 978 1 77614 684 0). 2021, xiii + 218 pp.

Jonathan Ancer and Chris Whitfield, *Joining the Dots: an unauthorised biography of Pravin Gordhan*. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers (pb £17 – 978 1 77619 105 5). 2021, 249 pp.

Tom Lodge, *Red Road to Freedom: a history of the South African Communist Party, 1921–2021*. Woodbridge: James Currey (hb £70 – 978 1 84701 321 7). 2022, 626 pp.

Thula Simpson, *History of South Africa: from 1902 to the present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (hb US\$37.50 – 978 0 19 767202 0). 2022, xx + 614 pp.

Marion Sparg, *Bulelani Ngcuka: the sting in the tail*. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers (pb £17 – 978 1 77619 197 0). 2022, xv + 390 pp.

Pieter du Toit, *The ANC Billionaires: big capital's gambit and the rise of the few*. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers (pb £16 – 978 1 77619 134 5). 2022, xxviii + 276 pp.

South Africa's public discourse has moved beyond the tribulations associated with consolidating a non-racial democracy. Complex political and economic problems under African National Congress (ANC) rule are now far more pressing concerns. Current discontents invariably generate rich debates within and beyond academic circles. This review article examines a selection of recent academic monographs on and journalistic accounts of South Africa's present predicament. It is divided into three sections. The first discusses scholarly works on structural inequalities and how socio-political groups contend with those structures. The consensus among the authors is that the ANC achieved majority rule without structural reform. Instead of

fostering inclusive growth, its leaders focused on rent seeking¹ and factional infighting. White-owned corporations continue to maintain their socio-economic privileges, albeit in partnership with a select number of ANC elites. This has resulted in perennial mass protests and false promises of a new dawn. A major obstacle to reform is a clutch of intertwined political and economic elites committed to blocking fundamental change. The second section shifts attention to recent biographies of eminent ANC personalities ostensibly endowed with attributes necessary to initiate structural course corrections. As elaborated below, present-day developments have proven such predictions to be over-optimistic. The final section attempts to place South Africa within a wider debate on oligarchic power in modern states. In it, I argue that South Africa's entangled corporate-political oligarchies enable mutual reinforcement of private interests at the expense of public assets.

Deep structures of minority rule and mass protest

The three monographs examined in this section analyse the origins and social consequences of mass economic exclusion in modern South Africa. Collectively, they shift historiographic tendencies that mainly attribute South Africa's current problems to apartheid-induced maldevelopment (Welsh 2010; Dubow 2014). Simpson and Friedman pay equal attention to events before and after 1948, while Lodge provides a comprehensive history of twentieth-century communist activism.

Deep histories of domination and resistance resulted in structures conducive to contentious politics. By the late nineteenth century, white minorities had subjugated the region's Black communities. Conflicts over mineral resources then led Boer and Briton to turn on each other, precipitating a full-scale war in 1899 (Pakenham 1979; Smith 1996). Although heavily reliant on African assistance to grind down Boer resistance, Britain chose to forge the Union of South Africa in partnership with its former adversaries rather than erstwhile allies (Mbeki 2009: 39–44). Black exclusion from governing institutions was jointly orchestrated by British corporate magnates and Afrikaner political leaders. From its inception, the Union government served a racial minority by oppressing the majority.

While apartheid was a more extreme form of separation, prior segregationist regimes bureaucratized structural inequities at a national level. Racial injustice naturally prompted massive resistance. Popular anger and revolutionary organizations concentrated on dismantling the most odious aspects of white supremacy and gaining basic civil rights. Political change came with economic continuity. Furthermore, state repression had created an ANC culture of secrecy and entitlement, allowing well-connected cadres to engage in plunder (Boraine 2014). Before long, ANC elites seceded from their own mass base to pursue private gain. Public services suffered as a result. Mass protests may have become more inchoate after 1994, but they continue. Protestors today draw on past practices and precedents to widen economic inclusivity. Mass action will continue until ruling elites, whatever their colour or politics, embrace inclusive development.

¹ I borrow Friedman's definition of rent seeking as 'the search for profits which exceed those available in a competitive market' (p. 53).

Thula Simpson's *History of South Africa* lies between a general history and a more specialized monograph. Its focus on politics since 1902 makes it a valuable complement to Beinart's (2001) study of twentieth-century socio-economic developments. Throughout, Simpson configures his narrative in conflictual terms. Since the Treaty of Vereeniging, South African elites – be they Briton, Afrikaner or African – have faced extensive resistance to their rule. While this opposition has taken the form of organized armed struggle on occasion, it has generally manifested as mass political action. South Africa's territorial unification in 1910 had indeed widened opportunities for corporate profit accumulation, but it also escalated the scale of social movements. Simpson contends that, by the 1920s, most politically active groups viewed a unified state as an established fact (p. 70); yet the character of that state remains a point of contention to this day. State structures geared to serving a white minority encountered wholesale rejection by a Black majority striving to redistribute resources and opportunities downwards. Consequently, state and society developed repertoires of repression and rebellion that have become so deeply embedded in South Africa's national fabric that these conflicts have continued long after the advent of democracy.

Simpson's opening chapters concentrate on Afrikaner and African efforts to break into power. The colonial state provided numerous points of entry for Afrikaner elites, while precluding Blacks from any meaningful participation in national politics. Hostile elements on the Afrikaner right remained, but these factions were either contained or co-opted, often by their more compliant brethren. Indeed, Afrikaners largely replaced the British as South Africa's political masters after 1910. They deployed political power to endow their community with material affluence. Mass Afrikaner uplift, via public works, parastatal employment and bureaucratic service, were well under way before apartheid's formal advent in 1948. African demands, by contrast, remained far more moderate, mainly focused on voting rights. These peaceful persuasion campaigns met with consistent denial. Simpson provides a careful account of these developments as well as a thorough discussion of African and Afrikaner participation in two World Wars. However, his text might have benefited from a clearer discussion of white settler empowerment within the British empire via military service. Jan Smuts' ardent Anglophilia and advocacy for a white Commonwealth of nations beneath a British imperial aegis provided an ideal pretext to consolidate South Africa's regional domination and global status. African participation in World War One was just as essential, particularly in carrier and commissariat services. Many Africans enlisted in the expectation that their loyalty would be rewarded by post-war politico-economic concessions. No appreciable improvements came.

Black South Africans underwent a similar pattern of high expectations, followed by dashed hopes, during and after World War Two. Service abroad and on production lines at home played a vital role in Britain's fight for survival. Allied victory resulted in largely rhetorical change. Nazi Germany's struggle for racial purity brought kindred movements throughout South Africa into disrepute. Nonetheless, Simpson makes too much of the United Nation's rejection of racial democracy (pp. 125–9). Apartheid was constructed in a bipolar Cold War environment, in which South Africa emphatically sided with the anti-communist camp. A favourable international context allowed for a deepening of separate development with minimal interference

from Western democracies (Koorts 2014: 383, 389). Britain itself was engaged in colonial reassertion throughout its African holdings, viewing them as vital sources of valuable commodities essential to post-war economic recovery. By the time these tendencies waned, and Britain urged the National Party (NP) to yield to the winds of change, apartheid policies had become deeply entrenched and would not be dismantled willingly.

As for Afrikaner politics itself, Simpson views D. F. Malan's NP faction as accruing power by playing on fears of white survival (p. 100). Segregation could not contain the influx of Africans into urban areas. White dominance required more radical measures, which his party pledged to provide if voted into power. Apartheid's architects cast Africans as fundamentally rural peoples belonging to tribal homelands and migrating to cities as temporary workers. Once they had provided the necessary labour, they were to vacate administratively demarcated areas and render them available for exclusive white use. For Simpson, what came before 1948 was more a question of degree than intention (p. 130). English-speaking white elites called for segregation within cities rather than between urban and rural areas, what J. G. Strijdom derisively referred to as the 'apartheid of Oppenheimer'. Simpson presents readers with two forms of Black subordination. The NP variety may have been more forthright in its racism, but corporate configurations of South Africa's political economy have proven far more enduring.

By the mid-1960s, it had become clear that Verwoerdian visions of separate development were unworkable. There were simply too few whites to keep a complex mineral economy functioning. Mines and factories required Black workers in situ to maintain sufficient levels of production. Thus, Simpson argues, many employers quietly ignored the more irksome and unprofitable elements of NP ideology (pp. 195–8). Business executives now viewed urban Blacks as critical components of consumer markets and lobbied for improved wages and working conditions. As the United Democratic Front movement gained traction after 1984, British conglomerates essentially abandoned the NP and focused on converting the incoming ANC leadership to market-driven economics.

Nonetheless, Simpson might have further explored participation by English-speaking whites in the apartheid project. Prudence and foresight on the part of British corporations negotiating the perilous shoals to majority rule have attracted extensive commentary. Much more remains to be said on white Anglophone involvement in state security structures (Ancer 2017). Simpson devotes only a few sentences to white Rhodesian recruitment into counterinsurgency units (p. 254). The role of the Anglophone white right merits closer attention and awaits further research.

Simpson is generally critical of the ANC's time in power. He attributes their failures to growing factionalism and rampant corruption. Corruption is ultimately rooted in the lived experiences of anti-apartheid revolutionaries. ANC cadres in exile and activist 'inziles' operated under immense pressure, withstanding decades of deprivation and violent repression (Boraine 2014: 9–17, 23–5, 28). Many embraced a culture of entitlement upon assuming power. While a few eschewed corruption, structures were put in place that allowed well-connected ANC officials to accumulate wealth and distribute resources to client networks. Thabo Mbeki may have refused to partake in predation, but most of these practices consolidated under his watch. Although Simpson does not state it directly, cadre deployment appears to have done

the most damage to the economy (pp. 373–4). Formally instituted in 1999, it brought a constant stream of appointments to state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and government ministries premised on party loyalty rather than professional qualifications. Incompetent officials either remained in post due to political protection or were redeployed to other positions.

Simpson should have emphasized several points more firmly. Cadres are expelled from the feeding trough only if they do not serve the interests of current powerholders. By concentrating on private accumulation, ANC officials neglect their public duties. Lack of infrastructural maintenance has eaten into economic growth and raised popular protests to alarming levels. Government programmes are mainly opportunities to plunder public goods and engage in conspicuous consumption. A liberation elite detached from its mass base has compelled increasing numbers of voters to withdraw their support. Those who do not vote for the opposition often do not vote at all.

Overall, Simpson's text neglects broader meanings for a detailed narrative. This is not an inherent fault, but readers might have profited from a more thorough consideration of implications and future possibilities. He concludes that current problems are not insurmountable, and South Africans have developed admirable traditions to overcome great difficulties (p. 494). These traditions include repertoires of mass action geared towards capturing the attention of detached elites and the ability to negotiate compromises between seemingly irreconcilable interests. Whether or not these qualities will serve South Africa well in a post-racial era remains to be seen.

Steven Friedman's *Prisoners of the Past* eschews narrative for theory, parsing deep structures that have enabled inequality to persist under majority rule. He contends that political practices, interest groups and modes of accumulation developed under minority rule have impeded the structural reforms necessary to construct a more inclusive society. Rather than condemning the corrupt institutional culture of the ANC, he roots its malpractices in path dependency. Friedman applies Douglass North's (1990) formulations to a South African context.

In its purely ideational form, path dependence argues that past developments have a direct bearing on current realities and prospects. Established practices persist after major ruptures because powerful interest groups benefit from those practices. In South Africa, these beneficiaries are incumbent economic interests, such as members of the mineral–energy–financial complex; yet they also include national liberation elites. After 1990, white economic elites granted Black political elites access to wealth for the former to avoid expropriation by the latter. Anti-colonial movements are, by their very nature, grievance-driven undertakings. Friedman contends that Africans strove to make white affluence available to an oppressed Black majority (p. xi). This was a misguided aspiration, as whites were a dwindling minority, relatively easy to placate in a racialized low-wage, high-repression economy. It proved impossible to transfer their living standards to the impoverished masses. Nonetheless, ANC elites embraced white privileges, salaries and consumer goods. On a more modest scale, the Black middle class has populated parastatals and government ministries. Friedman contends that ANC patronage politics is more about class formation than patrimonial predation (pp. 68–70). Just like Afrikaners before them, Africans rely on government employment for social advancement. This has not brought economic efficiency, but it

has delivered financial security to cronies and clients. Indeed, President Zuma's colleagues probably allowed him to engage in state capture for as long as he did because he allowed them to sustain their own patronage networks (Friedman pp. 66–7).

Political patronage is necessary because it is exceedingly difficult for professional revolutionaries to break into private companies. Friedman argues that material accumulation has been enabled by state favour throughout South African history (pp. 52–8). British corporations obtained steady supplies of cheap African labour via colonial state coercion. Subsequently, Afrikaner companies thrived on apartheid-induced compulsion. International sanctions in the 1980s massively increased levels of corruption as *securocrats* sought to circumvent interdictions on commerce (Van Vuuren 2018). Friedman is correct to emphasize that the ANC inherited a heavily criminalized political economy (pp. 54–8). However, as sanctions were lifted and globalization gathered pace, ANC leaders faced a situation where capital regained its mobility and could easily flow out of the country if squeezed too hard. Therefore, market-driven macro-economic policies were chosen as the means to constitute a Black middle class. Neoliberalism resulted in mass unemployment and the exclusion of a large African underclass from formal economic activity. Its benefits have mainly accrued to a well-connected few.

Friedman offers important insights as to why so many Africans endure poor governance. Many ordinary South Africans support the ANC due to its role in ending apartheid and instituting electoral democracy. In addition, critical infrastructural inputs in the form of housing, piped water and electricity came to townships long denied these essential services. Disillusionment quickly set in across South Africa's white suburbs. As more non-whites entered suburban life, opposition politics became more sociologically complex, but the basic divide between township and suburb continued after 1994. The Democratic Alliance took over the Western Cape, captured numerous suburban enclaves and lambasted the ruling party for its incompetence. Such developments did not result in an existential threat to the ruling party's national dominance. That threat came from service delivery deficiencies in Black townships. Chronic load-shedding commenced in 2008 and has reached crisis proportions in recent years. Power outages have disrupted informal economic activities and exacerbated unemployment in formal sectors. Friedman recounts how local Black politicians denied government jobs manipulated mass discontent, thus magnifying their nuisance value by posturing as the people's tribunes (pp. 69–70). As a result, ANC vote shares have steadily declined in urban metropolitan areas. Social grants assure loyalty in rural areas, but this is a contracting demographic, as most young able-bodied Blacks seek better lives in South Africa's sprawling cities. Analysts now predict that the ANC will not win an absolute majority in 2024's general election. Thus, a shift to coalition government is on the cards.

The long-term implications of this are far from clear. Coalitions are unlikely to solve South Africa's underlying problems. Friedman does not indulge in speculations over which partnership will shore up ANC rule and at what price. In his view, only direct negotiations between South Africa's economic and political stakeholders over fundamental issues will suffice (pp. 146–50). The political transition in 1994 basically left existing economic structures intact. Besides a few economically empowered Blacks and ANC cadres clinging to state salaries, most wealth remains in white

corporate hands. Big capital understands that expropriation without compensation would trigger seismic socio-economic ructions. Many ANC leaders are also aware of the negative consequences sudden asset seizures initiate. In Friedman's view, both sides must make concessions now to prevent losing far more in the future. However, his analysis is vague on who must render what to whom. When discussing funding shortfalls in South Africa's universities, Friedman categorically states that the best solution is for those with more wealth to pay more for education than those with less (pp. 96–8, 104–7). A similar arrangement might solve macro-economic problems as well. Private capital needs to invest more in South African society. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to spur high-speed economic growth. Corporations, however, remain reluctant to invest in activities that will not guarantee secure profits. Therein lies the dilemma.

Such dilemmas and debates often obscure leftist elements in South African politics. Tom Lodge's *Red Road to Freedom* provides a much needed corrective in this comprehensive history of the South African Communist Party (SACP). Several in-depth discussions have already appeared regarding its impact on the field (Cronin 2022; Southall 2022; Nzo *et al.* 2023). Rather than add to this debate, I will focus on Lodge's analysis of SACP contributions to ANC political culture. The Communist Party of South Africa, rebranded as the SACP in 1953, was heavily influenced by Jewish labour bunds originating in the Russian Empire. Given their own experiences with racial persecution, Jewish officials embraced multiracial politics and encouraged African participation in organized labour. By the late 1920s, communists had acclimatized to South African realities. With Comintern encouragement, the 1929 Party Congress formally endorsed the goal of establishing a Black republic prior to any transition to socialism. Communist theoreticians believed that South Africa was subjected to 'colonialism of a special type' in which Black labour was oppressed by a white bourgeois minority permanently settled in the country. In addition to facilitating the ANC's non-racialism, Lodge argues that SACP officials built up the liberation movement's technical expertise and professionalism. SACP members played a crucial role in recruiting, screening and training ANC cadres (p. 446). Furthermore, communist ideology bolstered ANC morale by giving rank-and-file members a sense that they stood on the right side of history. Throughout his text, Lodge refutes Ellis's (2013) assertions that the SACP was a means for Moscow to infiltrate and influence the ANC. Senior liberation leaders held dual SACP/ANC membership as a means of mutual reinforcement. Such reinforcement benefited, rather than captured, the freedom struggle.

The SACP's unbanning in 1990 brought about a surge in membership just as international communism was in a state of liquidation. Chris Hani's personal popularity contributed to this; however, the SACP's deference to African liberation was far more important (Macmillan 2021; Bundy 2012: 155). When the tripartite alliance between the ANC, SACP and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was formed in 1990, few viewed it as an association of equal partners. The alliance diluted the SACP's commitment to radical economic reforms. Lodge is correct to view the SACP as being of continuing relevance (p. 488). Indeed, the organization currently boasts around 300,000 members. Nonetheless, key ANC figures, such as Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, abandoned it soon after its unbanning (Adebajo 2016: 67). The SACP had been a useful means of obtaining training and resources. When

these inputs ceased with the Soviet bloc's collapse, it was viewed by Mbeki's faction as an irrelevance. For others, SACP membership instilled an enduring sense of loyalty, discipline and secrecy. These qualities were later utilized by some to form criminal networks involved in plundering state resources. Moreover, senior SACP members, such as Gwede Mantashe, have been accused of sacrificing the party's ideals for plum positions within the ANC. Leftist rhetoric has become a means of masking elite enrichment and neoliberal economic policies that have brought few benefits to the masses. The SACP's primary contribution to post-apartheid South Africa lies in techniques of cadre recruitment and factional organization, not macro-economic policy.

Structural and factional limitations on elite agency

Biographies in South African studies have long been dominated by a focus on eminent leaders of the liberation struggle (Lodge 2006; O'Malley 2007; Bundy 2012). The works discussed here reflect a more recent trend towards concentrating on figures who stood up to state capture and who purportedly possess attributes necessary to lead South Africa towards a new dawn.² These works agree that elite African agency during the democratic transition was limited by structural barriers placed on individuals tasked with managing revolutionary change. However, the authors should have placed greater emphasis on a confluence of structural and factional factors that continue to inhibit ostensibly reformist officials from enacting fundamental change.

Corporate elites began heading off radical economic transformation years before full-scale NP-ANC negotiations began. Company executives dissuaded ANC leaders from nationalizing the economy's commanding heights. Yet, the ANC swept into power on a wave of mass activism that no amount of coercion could crush. Circumstances compelled white economic elites to co-opt Black political elites into corporate governance. Such envelopment gave conglomerates influence over legislators and dissipated attempts at redistributive reform. Hence, company structures constrained political agents.

The works under review go beyond narratives of capitalist institutions shifting ANC priorities. The authors examine criminal networks within the ruling party preying on weak public institutions. State institutions are captured by private interests to accumulate wealth and to pursue personal vendettas. With a few exceptions, public institutions are unable to prevent penetration and maladministration by rent-seeking factions. Ministers and commissioners committed to institutional capacity building face fierce resistance from predatory interests. Reformists are often replaced and their reforms undone. South Africa's public assets must be given time to accrue the practices, precedents and personnel required to prevent capture. These things can happen only if such assets cease being treated as pathways to plunder.

Pieter du Toit's *The ANC Billionaires* examines the democratic transition from a corporate perspective. He divides the players into groups, broadly defined as businessmen, revolutionaries, NP policymakers and political fixers. Interactions between these groups resulted in the creation of a Black capitalist elite that, with one or two exceptions, has not manifested much in the way of entrepreneurial dynamism.

² Du Toit's more sceptical text is an important exception.

Du Toit's narrative concentrates on the role played by Anglo American, South Africa's premier mineral conglomerate. As is well known, Anglo officials viewed the NP's inability to control mounting unrest with increasing disquiet. P. W. Botha's refusal to fully cross the Rubicon in 1985 resulted in Gavin Relly, Anglo's chairman, leading a group of executives to meet with ANC leaders in Zambia. Anglo intended to lead the ANC away from the false promise of socialism and towards market-driven development.

This conversion ultimately proved successful for pragmatic reasons. According to du Toit, most ANC leaders had spent decades in exile or prison and had neither the means nor the skills to maintain themselves financially (pp. 72–4). Private companies moved in to provide material assistance. The foundation of the Consultative Business Movement in 1988 widened contact between radical cadres and corporate board members. Business outran government in accepting and managing a new political dispensation. F. W. de Klerk's unbanning of the liberation movements in early 1990 was a laggardly attempt to play catch-up, not a visionary act heralding a new dawn. Few would contest these elements of du Toit's narrative. Yet, the author often vacillates regarding corporate motives. Much of du Toit's information comes from interviews with Michael W. Spicer, a former Anglo executive. Spicer claimed that corporations were driven by 'enlightened' self-interest. From his perspective, ANC leaders, steeped in Marxist mysticism, simply did not understand modern economics. Socialism was in terminal decline and capital mobility made it difficult to command financial resources without guaranteeing privatized profits. Nationalizing mines and banks would trigger massive divestment and lead to ruin. Corporations proved less eager to admit that capital flight occurred in any case. Soon after the democratic government lifted capital controls, financial assets flowed out of South Africa and into First World stock exchanges. Contracting domestic capital supplies, along with tariff cuts on imports, accelerated deindustrialization and increased unemployment (Bundy 2014: 141–2). Regardless of neoliberalism's doctrinal merits, du Toit is unclear as to whether business elites ever had the greater good in mind. It is beyond dispute that, once corporate stakeholders tightened their hold on ANC policymakers, business influenced government to protect capital.

Protection came with long-term corporate costs, which du Toit tabulates in the closing section of his book. Influential Black politicians obtained company shares and senior positions under the mantra of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). These benefits accrued to a small group via a self-perpetuating momentum. Once companies selected individuals, those individuals became known quantities who furthered corporate interests and hence could be trusted with further endowments. From an entrepreneurial point of view, BEE had mixed results. African shareholders are over-reliant on the largesse of established corporations. Furthermore, white-owned companies allot ceremonial posts to Africans just to meet their empowerment quotas. Innovation from Black newcomers is consequently lacking. The one possible exception du Toit mentions is Patrice Motsepe (Chapter 19). Yet, it is debatable whether Motsepe could have accumulated so much wealth if he were not Cyril Ramaphosa's brother-in-law. To avoid downward distributions of wealth, corporations transferred assets to a small group of compliant ANC politicians and continuously recycled those same politicians into empowerment ventures. Stalled social transformation and deepening inequality invariably resulted.

These seemingly intractable problems have bred despondency. Current public discourse in South Africa views clean and capable statesmen as rare commodities. The third edition of Anthony Butler's biography of Cyril Ramaphosa appeared at a time when 'Ramaphoria' had little purchase in public discourse. Charitable assessments asserted that Ramaphosa inherited a parlous situation and pulled the South African state back from the brink of failure. Others branded his presidency as lacklustre and maddeningly muddled. Butler's appraisal is more sympathetic. He views Ramaphosa's life as a cycle of rises and falls (p. 435). Ramaphosa's rapid rise to prominence as a student activist in the Black Consciousness Movement was cruelly cut short by arrest and detention. His fortunes waxed anew when he founded the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 1982. The NUM soon boasted hundreds of thousands of members and went on to be a core component of COSATU. Ramaphosa's NUM then challenged Anglo American in the massive 1987 mineworkers' strike. Coercion and summary dismissals brought strikers, and Ramaphosa, to their knees. He nonetheless possessed sufficient political capital to assume the post of ANC secretary-general in 1991. Ramaphosa's prospects dimmed once more when he became Thabo Mbeki's enemy. Upon exclusion from the deputy presidency in 1996, he shifted his focus to a business career. BEE brought him great wealth and he re-entered the political fray at the ANC's fateful 2007 Polokwane conference. Thereafter, Ramaphosa steadily ascended the party hierarchy until clinching the state presidency in 2018. Colleagues characterize him as steady and methodical, only picking fights he can win.³

Butler contends that Ramaphosa has the requisite skills to reconstruct government institutions ravaged by his predecessor (p. 440). If this is true, Ramaphosa has held those skills in abeyance and is clearly on the downward slope of his latest career cycle. Service delivery has not improved since 2018 and holdovers from the Zuma era remain in his cabinet and the party's National Executive Committee (NEC). It would be more accurate to view Ramaphosa as a failing factional leader. Given the handicaps he faced, his ascent to the presidency was, no doubt, impressive. Unlike Xhosa or Zulu party leaders, Ramaphosa's Venda background did not allow him to rally political support by harkening back to a heroic past. His lack of exile credentials placed him at a further disadvantage. Nevertheless, he managed to forge a viable support group of protégés, opportunists and ostensibly clean politicians. Ramaphosa cultivated Gwede Mantashe in the NUM. Mantashe's senior positions within the SACP also gave Ramaphosa influence among that component of the tripartite alliance. Fikile Mbalula has regularly shifted his political allegiances with prevailing winds and has connections with various constituencies. If Mantashe and Mbalula are Ramaphosa's gatekeepers, Pravin Gordhan bolstered his administration's reformist image. This phalanx soon wore thin. Ramaphosa's key associates have repeatedly been accused of incompetence, while Mantashe and Gordhan appear to be at odds over energy policy. The only reason they remain in power is because they are loyal to the president. Increased load-shedding weighed down South Africa's post-Covid recovery while petrol price surges, prompted by the war in Ukraine, fuelled inflation. The Phala Phala scandal, allegedly linking Ramaphosa with money-laundering rackets, further tarnished images of a new dawn. Ramaphosa reluctantly stood for re-election as party president at the ANC's fifty-fifth National Conference in 2022 and won. He is,

³ No doubt, Ramaphosa's ignominious defeat in the 1987 strike contributed to this caution.

however, a spent force, propped up by supporters reluctant to relinquish control over the levers of patronage.

Ramaphosa has not been the only disappointment. In *Joining the Dots*, Jonathan Ancer and Chris Whitfield present Pravin Gordhan as a man capable of contributing to national renewal. Billed as an unauthorized biography, the authors use interviews with Gordhan and his close associates to paint a hopeful picture. The underlying implication is that there are still eminent figures from the freedom struggle who have not lost their way. Ancer and Whitfield assert that Gordhan believes in a culture of service, in which the greater good outweighs personal gain (pp. 1–8). Gordhan brought this culture with him into the South African Revenue Service, where he served as commissioner from 1999 to 2009. It also characterized his stormy stints as Minister of Finance (2009–14 and 2015–17). That integrity invited venomous hostility from state capture looters, making Gordhan the target of malicious smear campaigns that took a great toll on the man and his family. Gordhan had his defenders, including international financial institutions that viewed him as a safe pair of hands within a highly corrupt government. Global economic pressure prompted Gordhan's reappointment as finance minister in 2015. Soon thereafter, he became a symbol in the struggle against Zuma's kleptocratic administration, revered for his commitment to good governance. Ancer and Whitfield add to this chorus.

Subsequent events indicate that such optimism was premature. This is not entirely the authors' fault. Most books about current events are rapidly overtaken by subsequent events. Upon assuming his post as Minister of Public Enterprises in 2018, Gordhan acted more like an advocate than an activist. His firm support for the Ramaphosa faction has made him a reluctant participant in efforts to uncover wrongdoing in SOEs, particularly Eskom. Public services continued to run down under Gordhan's watch and his coordinating efforts with other government ministries leave much to be desired.⁴ In fairness, Gordhan and his colleagues inherited a gravely weakened state, almost completely hollowed out by plunder and mismanagement. Recovery was bound to be a slow process; however, Gordhan has done little to keep it on track.

Marion Sparg's *Bulelani Ngcuka* conveys a similar message to *Joining the Dots*. Her text consists of extended statements by Ngcuka melded with detailed information on his life and times. As inaugural National Director of Public Prosecutions (1998–2004), Ngcuka is best known for refusing to prosecute then deputy president Jacob Zuma for corruption in 2003, despite abundant prima facie evidence. Sparg and Ngcuka decided to write this biography to present the latter as a complex individual with a life beyond a single controversy. Ngcuka rose to prominence in the freedom struggle and devoted his post-liberation career to building institutional capacity. Having cut his teeth providing legal counsel for anti-apartheid activists under Griffiths Mxenge,⁵ Ngcuka was well qualified to lead the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA). Like Gordhan, however, he soon clashed with fellow comrades over corruption. Ngcuka's 'inzile' background and professional career within apartheid South Africa created mistrust among exile factions who felt that freedom had come from abroad. Ngcuka himself

⁴ Ancer admits that his views on Gordhan have shifted towards a more negative assessment since the publication of *Joining the Dots*. Zoom interview with Jonathan Ancer, 24 March 2023.

⁵ Mxenge was a prominent civil rights lawyer based mainly in Durban. He was assassinated by Vlakplaas operatives in 1981 (Sparg pp. 68–70).

was taken aback by how quickly corruption set in among senior ANC officials. Nevertheless, he felt duty bound to proceed with investigations and prosecutions of criminal activities without fear or favour.⁶ The most effective tool forged for this purpose was the Directorate of Special Operations (2001–09), popularly referred to as the Scorpions. This unit investigated high-profile crimes and brought many culprits to book. Consequently, it was abolished in 2009 as Zuma consolidated his power. Zuma's faction rendered other investigating authorities ineffective by either denuding them of political support or planting cronies in directorships. At the time of writing, calls for reinstating an investigative agency with the powers and capacities of the Scorpions have yet to be heeded.

Sparg's study makes for compelling reading. The NPA successfully identified and seized ill-gotten assets despite political pushback. Yet, for all Ngcuka's merits, his refusal to prosecute Zuma in 2003 remains controversial. Reasons given then, and subsequently, are not fully convincing. Sparg and Ngcuka stress that prosecution might not have led to a conviction and the ensuing backlash could have plunged the country into chaos. There is little doubt that Ngcuka made his decision in good faith. However, Zuma went on to seize power, engage in mammoth corruption and aggravate divisions within the ANC that eventually led to his removal in early 2018. By that point, evidence of Zuma's misconduct was so damning that he had to be brought to trial and imprisoned. When this happened in 2021, mob violence in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng resulted in a reported 354 deaths.⁷ This is not to argue that it would have been better to court disorder sooner rather than later, but Ngcuka's decision not to prosecute in 2003 only postponed the day of reckoning. Forbearance did not bring resolution.

Entangled oligarchs and varieties of rent seeking

Jeffrey Winters (2011) describes oligarchs as individuals who deploy wealth to defend wealth. Oligarchs mobilize capital to obtain political compliance with their objectives. When compliance is not forthcoming, they use wealth to coerce, cajole or co-opt opposition. Such measures often repel threats to oligarchic assets, particularly in countries with weak progressive institutions. Paul Hutchcroft's examination of patrimonial systems elaborates on relations between oligarchs and cronies (1998: 2, 13–15, 52–5, 114–15, 166–9). Oligarchs cultivate cronies to consolidate power. Cronies depend on oligarchs for patronage and can be relied on to deliver political support to oligarchic sponsors. To disobey a benefactor risks removal from the feeding trough. Yet oligarchs are not entirely free from danger, as certain cronies can accumulate enough resources to become autonomous rivals. While oligarchic characteristics apply to senior executives in South Africa's top conglomerates, high-ranking ANC officials are not mere corporate cronies. ANC leaders command independent access to political resources that cannot be revoked by oligarchic business elites. Indeed, business elites are dependent on ANC political power to protect their private assets.

⁶ Even eminent figures such as Mac Maharaj, one of Mandela's personal protégés, came under scrutiny for accepting bribes (Sparg pp. 273–5).

⁷ A recounting of these events can be found in *Report of the Expert Panel into the July 2021 Civil Unrest* at <<https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/content/report-expert-panel-july-2021-civil-unrest>> (accessed 1 April 2023).

As politicians seeking means of consumption, ANC elites mobilize political resources to extract rents from SOEs, established private corporations and entrepreneurial mavericks.⁸ Rent extraction has created an ANC oligarchy that uses politics to accumulate wealth. ANC oligarchs use this wealth to engage in conspicuous consumption. Consumption, in turn, signifies status and the ability to command resources, thus attracting larger followings and further consolidating an oligarch's political network.

Predation in the parastatal sector takes place under the banner of cadre deployment. Those deployed soon become indistinguishable from the criminal mafias that facilitate illegal acquisitions. Established private companies, by contrast, defend their wealth by transferring shares and allocating upper management positions to BEE businesspeople. Finally, entrepreneurial mavericks bankroll the electoral campaigns of ANC associates, fund elite consumption and allocate sinecures to their allies' clients. ANC oligarchs can and do utilize political power to extract wealth from all three sources. SOEs as points of cadre–mafia amalgamation indicate processes of convergence that require separate consideration. This section instead focuses on political elite entanglements with established conglomerates and entrepreneurial mavericks.

The mineral and financial conglomerates that consolidated their dominance over the South African economy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could not have done so without state power. British armies pulverized African kingdoms, prying loose a steady stream of Black labour to the mines. From 1899 to 1902, imperial forces wore down Boer resistance to British corporate control over the Witwatersrand's vast gold reserves. However, final victory proved costly. Colonial proconsuls contained Afrikaner resentments by handing them control over the Union government. Anglophone economic elites accepted this because Afrikaners assured a constant supply of low-wage African workers. This was particularly important on the Rand, given the poor quality of its gold-bearing ore. Extra-economic coercion made gold mines economically viable and mining houses extremely wealthy. By supporting political dispensations that guaranteed cheap labour, the mineral oligarchy was engaged in its own form of rent seeking.

South African oligarchs gradually diversified in terms of economic interests and culture. Afrikaners used their political privileges to cultivate compatriots in various business endeavours. Rising Afrikaner economic elites did not mix with their more established English-speaking counterparts in terms of schooling and social interaction, but they obtained comparable levels of wealth and similar interests in corporate bottom lines.

English capital accommodated Afrikaner businesses as circumstances required. In 1963, Harry Oppenheimer deflected threats of nationalization by allowing Federale Mynbou, a component of the Afrikaner Sanlam conglomerate, to purchase Anglo's General Mining and Finance Group (Butler p. 109). Changing demographics compelled boardrooms to rethink corporate strategy in the 1970s. Black townships grew larger, African workers obtained greater skills and white job reservation artificially inflated wages as South Africa's economic boom turned to bust. By the 1980s, both Afrikaans-

⁸ This set of categories is not exhaustive and does not include foreign sources of income, but they are the main domestic sources of rent for ANC elites. The shortcomings of foreign aid throughout Africa are discussed in Calderisi (2006).

and English-speaking economic oligarchs were eager to partake in the benefits of globalization and chafed under international sanctions (du Toit 2019).⁹ Conglomerates had coalesced and accumulated huge wealth through state protection. When the NP could no longer effectively utilize state power to control society, big business abandoned it. Capital had its own privileges to defend and opportunities to pursue. These interests were best served by a managed political transition.

Re-entry into global markets required further, and more radical, adjustments to the corporate oligarchy's character (Terreblanche 2002: 76–89, 95–108; Bond 2014). Whatever socio-cultural differences remained between Afrikaner and English capital, both groups were part of a proportionally shrinking white minority. The ANC cadres and activists with whom they cut deals could not have been more distinct, but secure assets came before racial survival. Business elites condemned ANC economic policies as hopelessly antiquated and unrealistic. Company managers, senior consultants and chartered accountants strove to show revolutionary leaders the way to market-driven growth. Yet, corporate oligarchs were not primarily concerned with creating a genuine Black capitalist class. Rather, capital's intention was to buy off influential Black politicians to prevent radical economic transformation. ANC infighting facilitated this objective. After consolidating control over the party in 1996, Thabo Mbeki's faction was committed to proving that Blacks could manage complex institutions. BEE showcased the formation of a 'patriotic bourgeoisie'.¹⁰ Senior ANC members parachuted into the boardrooms of South Africa's most prestigious and powerful conglomerates. Although this policy threw colleagues into the deep end, Mbeki was determined to stay the course. The leadership masked errors and irregularities committed by fellow comrades. Washed-out ANC members were circulated back into different companies on multiple occasions. Business acumen, a rare commodity among revolutionaries of any stripe, mattered less than placing the party's people in top corporate positions. ANC officials, in turn, felt they deserved large salaries and secure benefits after spending decades battling racial injustice. BEE was a policy geared towards display and entitlement, not development.

Although Cyril Ramaphosa certainly benefited from BEE initiatives, he has been cultivated by corporations since the 1970s. Despite an apparent reluctance to associate with white capital, Ramaphosa used these opportunities to advance his career. Moreover, he has not always delivered the desired results to his sponsors. Ramaphosa was nowhere near the pliant union boss Anglo American expected him to be. He proved sensible in negotiations for majority rule and was endowed with significant corporate shares after temporarily leaving the political limelight in 1996. He did not, however, relinquish his membership of the NEC, offering corporate colleagues a line of communication with Luthuli House. These connections helped Ramaphosa form Shanduka Group in 2001. As a holding company, Shanduka had interests in everything from food and beverages to financial services. Most controversially, Ramaphosa endorsed stern action against striking workers at the Marikana platinum mine in 2012.

⁹ I leave aside for present purposes individuals and companies that derived financial gains from sanctions busting; this topic is comprehensively covered in Van Vuuren (2018).

¹⁰ BEE had more pragmatic applications as well. Mbeki used it to thwart Ramaphosa's immediate political ambitions.

He was not the only Lonmin board member to do so, but, given his NUM background, many felt that Ramaphosa's priorities were misplaced.

Upon assuming the ANC presidency, Ramaphosa took a radical line, calling for land expropriation without compensation. Soon after, the ANC introduced a parliamentary motion to nationalize the Reserve Bank (Simpson pp. 455–6). These measures went nowhere in legislative terms, but they did keep businesses off balance and unwilling to overtly challenge ANC rule. BEE provides critical safeguards against asset seizures by giving Black politicians a stake in those assets. If companies go down, ANC board members will go down with them. Corporate and political oligarchs are thus entangled in a relationship of give and take. To avoid revolution, capital allows revolutionaries to collect rents.

Jacob Zuma pursued wealth by different means. Without formal schooling, he spent decades either in prison, on the run or in exile (Gordin 2008). While abroad, he formed a close relationship with Thabo Mbeki and gained a reputation as a tough operator. He achieved even greater prominence on his return to South Africa in 1990. By unabashedly embracing his Zulu ethnicity, Zuma skilfully drew political support away from the Inkatha Freedom Party and towards the ANC. His earthy demeanour and performative populism gave him a wide following in KwaZulu-Natal. Zuma did not mix well with white corporate elites. He instead chose to conduct business transactions with multinationals through intermediaries or sold political services to maverick entrepreneurs outside 'white monopoly capital'.¹¹ These relationships brought great riches but also plunged Zuma into never-ending legal battles. Schabir Shaik facilitated fraudulent tenders and financial retainers on Zuma's behalf during the arms deal. Zuma had been in dire financial straits after his return from exile and relied on Shaik for assistance. Maverick oligarchs are by no means solely responsible for such improprieties. Mbeki provided political protection from public inquiries that threatened to bring the liberation movement into disrepute. Such protection allowed corruption to thrive (Feinstein 2009). Nonetheless, freewheeling entrepreneurs outside established corporate channels were Zuma's primary means to material gain. He handled the political end while they delivered the goods.

As Shaik's star faded, Zuma grew reliant on the Gupta brothers, an Indian-born family that migrated to South Africa in 1993 and made a fortune in IT distribution (Myburgh 2017; Basson and du Toit 2017). Levels of plunder grew in proportion to Zuma's power. After becoming state president in 2009, he attempted to manipulate South Africa's legislative and bureaucratic structures in ways that served the interests of his financial backers. Zuma granted his cronies and kin access to Gupta-controlled rents. Loyal provincial party bosses, such as Ace Magashule, also formed lucrative relationships with the president's benefactors (Myburgh 2019). These schemes ultimately proved untenable. It was not in established capital's interest to have arriviste mavericks capture wide swathes of the national economy. Ramaphosa appeared to be a better bet. Moreover, Zuma's machinations triggered a sharp decline in the ruling party's electoral fortunes. Many agreed that either the ANC would have to learn to live without Zuma or South Africa would learn to live without the ANC.

¹¹ 'White monopoly capital' was a propagandistic concept developed by the public relations firm Bell Pottinger to deride Zuma's detractors (Simpson pp. 442–5). Bell Pottinger went into administration in 2017 due to its South African misadventures.

Zuma's attempt to hand over power to his ex-wife, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, failed. He fell back into a sea of legal troubles and his faction entered a power-sharing deal with Ramaphosa's group.

South Africa's recent political history is not a tale of capture and renewal. It is a tale of two oligarchs. Ramaphosa accumulated wealth by weaving his way into white conglomerates and establishing a pool of assets. Zuma financed his consumption and client building via political prostitution. He delivered tenders and favourable policies in exchange for resources. Ramaphosa's route to riches initially appeared more secure. Entrepreneurial mavericks are, after all, at greater risk of criminal prosecution than established corporations. But Ramaphosa, too, is currently under scrutiny for financial irregularities. Phala Phala has replaced Nkandla and economic problems persist. The ANC delivered political democracy and has thus far abided by electoral decisions. It will lose its mandate to govern if party leaders continue serving oligarchic, as opposed to progressive, constituencies.

Considering these conclusions, future scholarship on South African politics must focus on processes of oligarchic entanglement and interdependence. Both economic and political elites bear responsibility for a maldeveloped political economy that excludes the majority from formal sector employment. State capture is not the result of individual politicians gone astray; it is rather a recent manifestation of deep structural problems that transcend racial divisions and political regimes. The works reviewed here make valuable contributions to tracing further a long lineage of inequality; much, however, remains to be done.

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