

R. W. Johnson, *The Future of South Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1977. pp. viii + 328. £4.95 h.b., paper £1.95)

R. W. Johnson's book on the South African crisis has already met with widespread acclaim. The book is certainly topical, well-informed, and has a narrative thrust that makes its argument persuasive. The book is centred on the complex international manoeuvres surrounding the liberation struggles in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Namibia, manoeuvres which have, Johnson argues, largely determined the policies of the major capitalist states in their relations with South Africa. Johnson's account of these manoeuvres is thorough, and apparently well-informed, even though many of his claims are undocumented and some may appear very tendentious. The account is valuable in firmly locating the twists and turns of policies, and so in demonstrating the strictly limited character of the recent liberalization of America's Southern Africa policy. The concluding argument that the United States and its allies cannot afford not to let South Africa survive is an important one in the context of the euphoria that has greeted Andrew Young's initiatives in some circles. Although one may not disagree with Johnson's arguments about the development of the Southern African policies of the major capitalist powers, one can disagree fundamentally about the importance of these policies in determining South Africa's fate. Johnson's book is based on the systematic, and almost total, devaluation of the possibilities of change in South Africa emerging from the domestic unfolding of the crisis. It seems to me that this neglect is reinforced by the style of instant journalism that Johnson has chosen to adopt, for in adopting that style he has also adopted the ideology that the style has been developed to mobilize. This stylistic weakness does not simply affect the readability of the book, but penetrates its substance to the core. A complex historical process is reduced to a relatively simple and dramatic narrative, a melodrama in which historical actors pit their wits against one another against the background of pure contingency to which the rest of the historical process is reduced. This means that the significance of the moments of the process is completely inverted: while the day to day events that surround the taking of relatively superficial decisions move to the centre of the stage, the objective historical foundations of the process in which those decisions are inserted are simply dissolved into contingency. Moreover the actors who determine the course of the drama are those who are identified in the popular mind as those who wield effective, indeed almost total, power: the holders of high political office. This kind of dramatization of history is not, therefore, simply superficial, but is positively misleading in focussing on the actions of individual subjects and in ignoring the changing social relations in which those actions are inserted and which alone give them meaning. The introduction to Johnson's book establishes the identity of the hero and heroine of the drama (South Africa is constantly referred to as 'she') by ridiculing all the participants in the Geneva negotiations over Zimbabwe in order to establish the heroic status of the absentees, the South African and the United States governments. The first three chapters examine the domestic circumstances of the heroine. The insignificance of the domestic opposition to the South African regime is established by noting the 'intellectual confusion' of its exiled leadership, which is contrasted unfavourably with the 'amazing resilience' and the 'astonishing achievement' of the South African government in engineering the post-Sharpeville economic miracle of the 1960s. However, the heroine turns out not to be such a tower of strength, for her attempt to diversify her international trading contacts and so to establish her independence from foreign economic pressure foundered on the African trade boycott, that threatened South Africa with a chronic balance of payments deficit. South Africa's vulnerability to foreign pressure brings the hero onto the stage, for the prime variable in South Africa's balance of payments situation is the price of gold. The scene is

now set for the drama to unfold. The crises that beset South Africa are treated as largely contingent factors that can be overcome domestically provided only that the government has sufficient willpower (a quality it certainly doesn't appear to lack), for 'the economy may well appear to tremble on the brink of the apocalypse but it is too fundamentally strong not to pull through by the simple expedient of off-loading most of the costs of recession on to the blacks. It is possible . . . that we shall witness further revolts . . . What is certain (not just possible) is that such revolts, if they take place, will be thoroughly and effectively repressed.' (p. 323) Thus the South African regime faces no serious domestic threat. The fate of South Africa depends on her ability to overcome her chronic payments imbalance internationally, and this in turn depends, in the short term at least, on the price of gold. The state of crisis is maintained by a whole series of misfortunes which befall the heroine in her attempt to escape her fate. On the one hand her diplomatic setbacks and the Soweto rising lead to a progressive loss of foreign confidence. On the other hand a series of contingent factors intervene: the oil crisis, the expanding trade boycott, Britain's entry into the EEC, Portuguese decolonization and association with the EEC, the continued recession in world trade, failures in particular markets. This chain of misfortunes is not effectively integrated into the narrative and certainly reduces the dramatic thrust of the main story, which is centred on the US's manipulation of the price of gold. The gold price is treated as the prime determinant of South Africa's fate and as something that can be set almost at will by the United States. Although there is some discussion of the role of gold in the international monetary system, the book concentrates on the determination of the gold price as an aspect of the United States' Southern Africa policy. Thus the story of the gold price is the story of the complex diplomatic manoeuvres surrounding the liberation struggles in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Namibia. Hence the bulk of the book has very little to do with South Africa, except as the object of US foreign policy, and is concerned above all to give a blow-by-blow account of these manoeuvres. The introduction of the lesser characters is determined by the dramatic requirements of this account. Thus Britain and France enter as minor participants in the drama whose incompetence leaves them posturing in the wake of events whose course is determined by the superhero and heroine, the United States and South Africa. The representatives of the liberation movements and of the independent African states are treated even more contemptuously, being ridiculed variously as opportunists, charlatans, and poseurs who have strayed from the set of a comic opera. Dramatically the story is a weak one, for the fate of South Africa throughout depends on the will of the United States so that there is little scope for the development of character and the plot itself unfolds in a very linear way, simply shifting back and forth between negotiating tables and gold auctions. The arguments on which Johnson's account centres suffer from two weaknesses. Firstly, Johnson abandons academic caution to write a book based largely on undocumented and unsubstantiated evidence linked by speculative hypotheses that too often acquire their own momentum. Without further research, and further disclosures it is therefore impossible to evaluate Johnson's account. Secondly, Johnson's most fundamental argument is based on the assertion that the gold price has 'nothing to do with economics . . . the figure of \$35 had been fixed entirely by whim . . . The \$35 price level rested on political fiat, and the South African economy rested on that.' (pp. 68-9) There is no serious analysis of the international payments system and the role of gold in international settlements to support this extraordinary assertion, with the result that Johnson completely misinterprets the role of gold in the developing capitalist crisis. Moreover Johnson persistently identifies the prime object of the US gold price policy as South Africa, despite the fact that even his own account brings out the paramount importance of US relations with the EEC and with the Soviet Union in this respect. Much more important than the

weaknesses of the arguments offered by Johnson, however, are the arguments he ignores. His entire book is premised on the assumption, that is stated but not seriously defended, that the crisis that confronts South Africa is essentially an externally induced crisis, operating through South Africa's need for foreign exchange and investment finance: 'Although these crises were to have important internal repercussions with a momentum all of their own inside South Africa, they were all essentially generated outside South Africa.' (p. 82) Correspondingly for Johnson there is no serious internal threat to the South African regime, and so no prospect of the apartheid state being overthrown as a result of domestic political developments. Indeed Johnson clearly regards a strengthening of apartheid as the most likely development on the basis of domestic tendencies. It is these related assumptions that must be contested as strongly as possible. For Johnson the crisis that confronts South Africa is a purely economic crisis, a matter of certain financial imbalances on its international account that are themselves the result of the cruelty of the fates in assigning South Africa a particular pattern of trade. What Johnson fails to realize is that these economic relations cannot be divorced from the social relations of which they are a fetishized form. The task of a serious analysis of the South African economic crisis is to penetrate the fetishized forms in which this crisis presents itself in order to locate behind the economic and financial statistics the social relations that they express. While there is no doubt that the price of gold is, from South Africa's point of view, an exogenous factor that can have a considerable impact on South Africa's short term prospects, it cannot postpone the impact of the crisis indefinitely. The flow of foreign investment, so important to South Africa for financing its payments deficit as well as its increasing military and domestic investment expenditure, is not going to be forthcoming simply because the South African government is ruthless in its enforcement of repression. Foreign investors seek to earn profits, and the primary condition that determines an inflow of foreign investment is the profit potential of that investment. Hence foreign investment flows are not exogenous economic variables that can create and solve crises. The flow of foreign investment is much more a symptom of the state of the economy than a determinant of it. Although political events such as Sharpeville, Angola and Soweto can have an impact on investment flows, this impact is generally very much overemphasized, especially by the South African government which seeks to conceal the seriousness of the crisis it confronts by presenting the reaction of foreign investors as an irrational response to minor disorders. Thus, for example, the condition for the resurgence of foreign capital inflow after Sharpeville was not simply the restoration of foreign confidence by the wave of political repression, it was rather the whole strategy implemented in the 1960s to favour the rapid and profitable development of manufacturing industry, a strategy that certainly involved systematic repression, but that also involved the development of urban labour force suitably 'responsible' and 'disciplined', a development anticipated by the Viljoen Commission in 1958 and implemented increasingly systematically in the 1960s; that involved the rapid growth of mining and agriculture to provide foreign exchange, government revenue and investible funds; that involved a considerable increase in infrastructural investment, especially for power and transport; that involved a readiness to resort to inflationary financing despite the unfavourable impact of inflation on mining and agriculture. To say that 'there was no doubt that it was in this huge flow of foreign capital that the secret of the South African economic miracle was to be found' (p. 30) is to say nothing at all - the huge flow of foreign capital was the economic miracle, and that is hardly a secret! The boom of the 1960s was underlain by, and in turn wrought, massive changes in social relations. It is these changes that help explain the 'intellectual confusion' of the exiled revolutionary leadership of which Johnson is so contemptuous, and that underlie the new and dramatic forms of struggle exemplified in the Durban strikes and the

Soweto rising, that Johnson considers significant only for their impact on the confidence of foreign investors. At the same time the current acute economic crisis confronting South Africa shows that these social changes have not been enough. South African manufacturing industry continues to be uncompetitive on world markets, while gold exports have been more or less stagnant in volume terms since 1965 and the rapid volume growth in food and livestock exports from 1965-68 has been sharply reversed subsequently. It is no good arguing that the South African government stood firm after Sharpeville and got away with it, for the present crisis is to a considerable extent a consequence of the measures taken in the wake of Sharpeville. If it is to take the kind of measures that can improve the competitive position of capital in South Africa, the state will simply be exacerbating the conflicts between capital and labour at the point of production and between the state and the working class in the ghettos out of which the new forces of resistance to the rule of capital in South Africa have developed. It is because Johnson lacks any analysis of the crisis of social relations in South Africa that he has a completely static and unchanging view of the crisis and of the response to that crisis. The working class in South Africa has changed a great deal since Sharpeville, and it will continue to change. The present phase of the struggle is only in its infancy, and suffers from many weaknesses. But to consider that these struggles must be written off completely because they are not going to produce a revolution overnight, as Johnson does, is to adopt a completely ahistorical approach which denies that these struggles can actually learn from the past or develop further in the future. Fortunately all the signs are that Johnson's book, like most such instant products, is already being overtaken by events.

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