

# Crisis, History and the Challenge of Reinvention in the Postcolonial

## The African National Congress after Apartheid

*Laurence Piper*

Susan Booysen. 2011. *The African National Congress and the Regeneration of Political Power*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Anthony Butler. 2012. *The Idea of the ANC*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Stephen Ellis. 2012. *External Mission: The ANC in Exile*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.

Arianna Lissoni, Jon Soske, Natasha Erlank, Noor Nieftagodien and Omar Badsha (eds). 2012. *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press and South African History Online.

The African National Congress, Africa's oldest and most famous liberation movement, and home of one of the iconic leaders of modern times, is in crisis.<sup>1</sup> Further, while it may have been in crisis many times before in its history, and a history of adaptability and reinvention, it is unclear exactly if, or more accurately how, it will resolve its current predicament. This is the key common theme of a number of otherwise diverse books recently published on the ANC.

The four books under review, two historical and two more contemporary, represent important versions of the dominant scholarly narratives on the ANC amongst South African intellectuals today.<sup>2</sup> They are in most other respects quite different, however. Booysen and Butler are both political scientists working at the Universities of Witwatersrand and Cape Town, respectively, but the similarity between the books ends there. Booysen's approach is a policy analysis aimed at the expert, driven largely by evidence, documentary analysis and interviews whereas Butler writes something more like an extended essay, aimed at a wider intellectual audience globally, that weaves the historical and contemporary into one.

In turn, Stephen Ellis and Arianna Lissoni and company are historians. Ellis is a former editor of the influential newsletter *Africa Confidential* and of *African*



*Affairs*, and is currently the Desmond Tutu Professor in the Faculty of the Social Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. Trained at SOAS, Arianna Lissoni is a postdoctoral research fellow at North-West University, Mafikeng. John Soske is assistant Professor at McGill, Natasha Erlank is associate Professor at the University of Johannesburg, Noor Nieftagodien is chair of the History Workshop and lectures in History at the University of the Witwatersrand, and Omar Badsha is founder and CEO of South African History Online.

Where Ellis' text bears all the signs of a carefully researched close history on a specific topic, informed heavily by primary evidence from ANC documents and interviews with key ANC figures, Lissoni, Jon Soske, Natasha Erlank, Noor Nieftagodien and Omar Badsha have compiled a diverse range of arguments about the ANC from its formation in 1912 until the present, varying significantly in theory, theme and style. *Emerging from the One Hundred Years of the ANC* Conference at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2011, Lissoni and her colleagues have selected and framed the chapters in ways that speak to the diversity of debates both on the ANC and, to some extent, on contemporary historiography in South Africa.

The claim that reading these texts conveys a sense of the ANC in crisis might not seem plausible at first. One reason for scepticism is the ANC's electoral success for the last twenty years, and its related dominance of the state and much of political society through alliances with the trade union movement and other important civil society formations. However, the current crisis is less about political power, although even on that front the ANC is weakened, as Booyens points out, and more about political authority. To my mind, it is the idea of the ANC as redeemer of an oppressed and impoverished people, based on its liberation credentials and surrounding nationalist mythology that is now in radical decline. This is a moral crisis that calls into question its very identity as liberator of the oppressed. While not discussed in these terms, the books under review allude to this in different ways – the historical texts by unpacking the ANC's version, and use, of history as myth, and the political by mapping the failings and tensions that confront the ANC today.

In addition to sharing some conception of crisis, the books under review point to the importance of history in analysing the present state of the ANC and asking questions about its future. Some use history as a counter-point to the mythology of the party, most obviously Ellis' accounts of the South African Communist Party's little-known dominance of the ANC in exile, while others point to history as a resource for reinvention for the ANC, perhaps best captured in Netshitenzhe's chapter in Lissoni et al., where he situates current challenges in the longer history of a continuing search for political identity.

A related debate picks out whether the current crisis in the ANC is linked to the arrival of formal democracy in 1994, and whether this really constitutes a rupture in South Africa's history, as hinted at by Butler, or is better seen as an epiphenomenal shift in the ongoing story of the expansion of the 'empire of capital' as advocated by John Saul in Lissoni et al., and for that matter, by

current political actors like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Lastly, intertwined with themes of history as myth-busting versus history as a political resource, and the current context as one of political rupture versus political-economic continuity, is the debate on exceptionalism – whether this be the exceptional history of the ANC, the ‘miraculous’ transition to democracy in South Africa, or the liberal-democratic nature of post-apartheid politics.

In what follows I will review the arguments of these books as part of a widely made case that the current identity crisis of the ANC represents a moment in the transition of the party from a nationalist liberation movement to ‘party-state’. My more specific contribution is that, while currently the party inhabits the ambiguous, but also resourceful space of what Booyesen (p. xi) calls ‘movement-party’, the trajectory is towards a postcolonial politics of state capture and state-driven class formation similar to other places in Africa and beyond. The reason for this shift is ultimately simple. It is about the fundamental change in the political system brought about by the demise of apartheid and the access to state power and resources enabled by electoral democracy. From being excluded from state power and resources for nearly a century, the ANC now enjoys practically unlimited access to it – the problem is what to do with power. Reaching back to the 1990s, the crisis has deepened as the ANC has found the pursuit of power that is life as a party-state steadily colonising the pursuit of national liberation or life as a political movement. The crisis then, I suggest, is not one of power, but of purpose, and hence moral leadership or liberation nationalism.

At the heart of my analysis will be a distinction between the political and normative projects of the ANC, largely conjoined in the nationalist vision of the anti-apartheid struggle, and now disaggregated. Simply put, during the struggle years, opposition to apartheid defined both the ANC political and normative projects. It sought to end the apartheid system and morally opposed its oppressive and exploitative character. With the demise of apartheid, the moral project has diversified. While the ANC remains politically divided in seeking to remain in office, the vision of what it ought to do for the nation is now contested. The divergent visions of the socio-economic future of South Africa pull in different directions and are exacerbated by emergent processes of class formation, and internal competition for office, produced by ANC rule. These ideological and social divisions also add great complexity, and enduring uncertainty, to coalition formation within the party.

At the same time as arguing that the current identity crisis in the ANC is qualitatively different from previous ones because it is from a position of state power, as outlined by Booyesen, I also suggest that the shift from liberation movement to party-movement and increasingly party-state makes the ANC more like liberation movements turned dominant parties in other postcolonial contexts. This is not a point developed in these texts, outside perhaps of Southall’s chapter in Lissoni et al. Thus while history is critical to understanding the ANC in the present and possibilities into the future, it is not just the

history of the ANC or South Africa, but rather history in a more comparative frame. It also means that history as myth-making for the ANC after 1994 becomes much more difficult. On this view the ANC becomes less exceptional, as implied by Lissoni and her colleagues, and stated by Ellis, albeit that it retains some particularities, and South African studies more widely are opened to analytical insights from other postcolonial contexts.

### **Butler: *The Idea of the ANC***

Part of the Ohio Short Histories of Africa, *The Idea of the ANC* by Anthony Butler is an accessibly written essay-length text, and is best understood as a treatise on how the ANC today understands itself rather than a thorough-going history of ideas. In many ways the key question lurking behind the book becomes clear in the conclusion – does the ANC have the intellectual resources to cope with the challenges of a post-apartheid project of ‘emancipation through modernisation’ (p. 130) or will ‘ambivalence about modernity’ allow political entrepreneurs to summon up ‘empty fantasies about the land and about tradition’ (p. 130)? Notably, Butler holds that ‘social democracy and the developmental state cannot serve as blueprints [for the modernising project] because they emerged in quite different historical circumstances from those which prevail in South Africa today’ (p. 128–9).

To answer this question Butler sets out to explore the key ideas held by party intellectuals and activists that, at least in part, have defined the identity of the ANC historically. ‘For such intellectuals’, says Butler, ‘the ANC is more than an organisation, it is an idea’ (p. 14). In essence then, Butler is unpacking the DNA of the discourse of ANC nationalism, and identifies three notions key to this history: agency, unity and liberation. In the process of engaging with each of these notions, he identifies key intellectual traditions that influence the party until today including ‘self-consciousness’: ‘[T]he ANC is a mechanism of deliberation and reflection; and its favourite object of contemplation is itself’ (p. 119). Other key traditions include communism and Christianity, and for Butler the combination of these three defines intellectual resources at the disposal of the ANC.

Beginning by unpacking ‘agency’, Butler notes that a key theme in ANC discourse is the enduring capacity to act despite sometimes overwhelming oppression, and often uncritical affirmation of the significance of the movement’s contribution to social change. Not only has this ‘subtract[ed] chance, complexity and human history from history’, but yielded an account of South African history ‘dominated by historical inevitability’ (p. 57). Notwithstanding this conclusion, it is not always clear where Butler’s account of South Africa’s history differs from the ANC’s version – a problem perhaps due to the short nature of the work, but also indicative of a wider problem identified by Netshitenzhe in Lissoni et al., that the history of the ANC is that of the

struggle of the South African people. How one disentangles these two histories, and myth from fact, is a recurring problem of South African historiography, as Lissoni and her co-editors note.

In 'Unity' Butler deals with the issues of identity politics, the exclusive nature of the ANC claim to represent, and the 'broad church' of ideologies within the ANC, exploring the centrifugal and centripetal logics of each of these at key points in time, concluding that 'the ANC has not settled upon a philosophy of government that can reliably generate internal cohesion and social solidarity without threatening to incapacitate opposition or to suppress diversity or dissent' (p. 91). Key to this is how Butler draws on Zolberg's (1966) observation that nationalist movements embraced the authoritarian mind-set of their colonial predecessors and affirmed national unity through the party, and practically through state patronage of leaders of key social groups in divided societies.

In 'Liberation' Butler points to the current frustration with a lack of 'economic freedom' in South Africa, pointing to the contending Marxist and Christian traditions of approaching the issue of poverty, inequality and the market, and suggesting that significant sections of party leadership has limited commitment to liberal-democratic institutions due especially to the lingering influence of Marxist thought. An example of this tension is captured by ANC intellectual Joel Netshitenzhe that 'the history of the ANC is, in essence, the struggle of the South African people for self-determination ... Yet, in assuming the status of an equal participant in elections ... the ANC also diminishes its status somewhat, becoming just another party' (2012: 14).

*The Idea of the ANC* is a short and thought-provoking interrogation of some key ideas that influence the thinking of ANC intellectuals today, and as such, offers important insight into the kinds of thinking we can expect from the party going forward. It is not, and does not pretend to be, a history of the ANC, or even a history of ideas in the ANC (see Barchiesi in Lissoni et al. for an excellent example of this), although it clearly affirms the importance both of ideas and of the history of ideas. In this regard, it is creditable how Butler plays more attention to Christianity and its influence on the contemporary ANC than do most historians, and especially ANC intellectuals.

Most significantly, it affirms the importance of distinguishing history as truth-seeking from history as myth, or liberation teleology, although – perhaps inadvertently – Butler points to the difficulty of separating these activities out in the case of the ANC. In addition, *The Idea of the ANC* suggests the utility of postcolonial politics from elsewhere in Africa for understanding the kinds of behaviour evident in the ANC today, suggesting the significance of factors other than ideas for understanding politics. Lastly, while Butler assumes a largely critical stance to the veracity of the ANC's version of history, in implying that the ANC is *the* central actor to achieving 'liberation through modernity' in South Africa, Butler could be read as affirming the exceptionalism of the ANC.

### **Ellis: *External Mission***

With Stephen Ellis' *External Mission: The ANC in Exile* we move profoundly from the theme of history as myth to history as truth-seeking. Indeed, in this detailed and thorough examination, Ellis is committed to myth-busting received party wisdom on the relationship between the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) in the exile years, and to exposing the incompetent and often brutal character of life inside the ANC's armed wing, Mkhonto we Sizwe.

A key claim from *External Mission* that has attracted media attention, including in social media, is that Mandela was co-opted onto the central committee of the SACP (p. 21), a claim Mandela has always denied. However, drawing on testimony from senior colleagues, Ellis makes a compelling case that, at least for a while, Mandela did participate actively in SACP structures. He also makes a strong case that the significance of the SACP grew as Mandela wanted access to weapons from socialist states, and knew that the SACP could mediate on behalf of the ANC. Further, the decision to prosecute armed struggle not through the ANC alone, but through a joint ANC/SACP formation called Mkhonto we Sizwe (MK) is explained in terms of trying to partially shield the ANC from state backlash (p. 25).

Perhaps more provocative is Ellis' characterisation of the growth of SACP power over the ANC over the subsequent decade. As evidence for this, he points to the decision by the important Morogoro consultative conference in 1969, where over 70 delegates from various sub-components of the ANC and its allies gathered to reflect on the challenges facing the ANC in exile, that white and minority supporters could become full ANC members, although they remained barred from the ANC's National Executive Council. However, minorities were allowed on the Revolutionary Council that ran MK, and which 'had indeed become the real centre of power in the ANC, despite the fact that it was formally junior' to the ANC national executive committee (p. 99). Furthermore, Morogoro saw the adoption of a SACP-originated Strategies and Tactics document that defined the urban working class as a leading force of 'national democratic revolution'.

Organisationally, the aftermath of Morogoro saw several senior SACP members appointed to ANC offices, including that of Secretary-General and Treasurer. Perhaps just as importantly, Ellis argues that the ANC's traditional collective leadership 'was subtly altered into a system resembling the Leninist technique of democratic centralism. After a decision had been taken at the top level, every other organ and individual within the ANC was expected to accept it without dissent' (p. 79). Further, all of this was done undercover: rank-and-file ANC members did not know how closely the SACP and ANC leaderships overlapped, and SACP's own aim was, in Ellis' words, that 'the Party should lead, but not be seen to lead' (p. 105).

The second major revisionist thrust of *External Mission* is Ellis' contention that MK was not just a failure militarily, but that as an organisation it was

characterised by internal leadership feuding whilst combatants were ignored and often badly treated in the camps, to the point of sparking revolt by 1980. The case for the military failure of MK is probably already widely accepted in the history literature where more credence is given to its symbolic and propaganda value inside South Africa. In respect of life in the camps and the dynamics of leadership, Ellis makes an important contribution to a growing body of literature stretching back to Twala and Bernard's *Mbokodo: Inside MK: Mwezi Twala – A Soldier's Story of 1994* (1994), to Hugh McMillan's *The Lusaka Years: The ANC in Exile in Zambia, 1963–1994* (2013).

There are problems with Ellis' relentless myth-busting. For example, there are very few references in the book to Scandinavian support despite the fact that it exceeded that of the USSR during this period. This fact connects to a larger point that the SACP's influence was tempered by the ANC's long-standing commitment to democracy in a post-apartheid South Africa. Indeed, this commitment arguably allowed it to secure and retain the support of the international community.<sup>3</sup> The ease with which the ANC moved away from a traditional communist vision of the SACP during the transition years also raises questions about the real extent of SACP influence. But even granted this, Ellis does an excellent job in questioning the exceptionalism inherent in history as myth about the ANC and South Africa, both by demonstrating the feet of clay of the ANC, but also by revealing the significance of international relations and political events for the ANC and South Africa. This adds balances to the myth of party agency. Indeed, as Ellis concludes, 'South Africa does not have a special place in the calculations of foreigners. It is just another country' (p. 304).

### **Lissoni et al.: *One Hundred Years of the ANC***

The idea that the ANC is not as influential as claimed, and that South Africa's history is not as exceptional as often suggested, complicates the single, heroic narrative of liberation, and suggests that the relationship between the present crisis of the ANC and the past needs to be rethought. In essence this is the driving question that fuels the debates that run through *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today*, edited by Arianna Lissoni, Jon Soske, Natasha Erlank, Noor Nieftagodien and Omar Badsha. Emerging from a conference at Wits University in 2011, the book presents a selection of fifteen papers from the conference as well as two remarkable keynote addresses by Philip Bonner and Joel Netshitenzhe.<sup>4</sup> The widest ranging in time frame, theoretical approach and substantive focus, this collection covers all three of the framing debates identified in this review – and more. Framed by a thoughtful introduction that also serves as a guide to some key issues of contemporary South African historiography, the book is a fabulous resource for any scholar of the ANC or of South African history and politics.

Substantively, the book is organised around four main themes, organised roughly sequentially by chapters. The first is religion and nationalism in the early years of the twentieth century, chapters that also emphasise the significance of regional contests within the ANC versus national authority. An example here is Norman Etherington's chapter on how settler racism towards black Christianity in Natal at the beginning of the twentieth century was critical to the development of nationalism. A second theme can be summarised as 'questioning teleology', based on reinterpretations of significant moments in the history of the ANC that disrupt the myth of the ANC. An exemplar here is Barchiesi's impressive chapter on how ideas of 'dignified' labour and the 'patriotic' worker endured down time in ANC discourse, affirming particular capitalism conceptions of modernity (notably backed against Ellis' SACP dominance position). Barchiesi shows how the early ANC of the 1910s and 1920s pioneered a normative conception of 'dignified labour' that preceded similar ideas in the settler colonial state. He suggests these ideas endure until the present and are manifest in the current ANC's idea of 'decent work'.

Other important questions raised include the often under-recognised importance of racial and regional discourses in the Congress movement. Nieftagodien argues that space has been more crucial to popular agency, and hence the history of the ANC, than often assumed. Focusing on the 1940s, he shows how the production of contentious urban spaces resulted from the emergence of 'black spots', overcrowded and racially mixed informal settlements formed due to rapid urbanisation and proletarianisation. These places became the sites of new and contentious politics that included demanding rights to the city. Liz Gunner explores representations of Albert Luthuli's funeral in isiZulu medium newspapers, affirming both the centrality of performance to ANC culture, and the importance of languages other than English in understanding ANC history.

The third theme centres on questioning exile and imprisonment (similar to Ellis) as reflected in Hugh Macmillan's chapter on the *Shishita* crisis in the ANC in exile in Zambia in 1980. The *Shishita* crisis referred to an authoritarian crackdown by ANC leadership on members in exile suspected either of being spies for the apartheid state or participants in criminal activities like drug smuggling and car smuggling (p. 234). A thorough-going examination of the crisis reveals significant weaknesses of the ANC in exile, including poor security systems, the abysmal management of MK camps, and a brutal over-reaction to fears of spying. Other chapters on this theme deal with forgotten or oppressed events or people who complicate the myth of the ANC such as Vladimir Shubin's chapter on 'Comrade Mzwai' or Mzwandili Piliso. A luminary of the international circuit in exile years, Piliso fell from favour by admitting to ANC atrocities in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s (p. 271).

The last theme deals with the question of the ANC in power, and the revolution 'deferred or betrayed'. Central to the ANC's ideology of National Democratic Revolution is the notion that colonialism in South Africa was of



'a special type' that combined settler racism and capitalist exploitation. Hence liberation would require two phases, the political liberation from racism and a second phase of liberation from capitalist exploitation through using democratic state power. Where the advent of democracy in 1994 is seen by many ANC intellectuals as securing political power, it is widely recognised as not securing economic change. The debate centres on the extent to which the compromises made in negotiations leading up to the new Constitution of 1996 have 'deferred' or 'betrayed' economic liberation.

Firmly in the 'betrayed camp', John Saul writes of how the ANC's ascent to political power has enabled the economic recolonisation of South Africa, not just by protecting the inherently skewed ownership patterns of private property, and partly indigenising it, but by reintegrating these into the international capitalist order. Others, notably Booyesen, focus on the change brought by the ascent to power of the ANC, and how the party is able to entrench itself as 'party-movement' with four sources of power through elections, the state, the people directly and the ANC as an organisation. Van Kessel and Southall speak to the nascent socio-economic divisions wrought by post-apartheid rule amongst both party activists and the citizenry more widely, with Southall mapping the emergent class formations affirmed by ANC rule. Although he stops short of saying so, he makes a strong case for seeing the ANC as a vanguard for the black middle-classes integrated into, or affirmed by, the 'party-state'.

Southall's chapter is one of the few that takes seriously the political sociology of the ANC, other than Philip Bonner's keynote address at the beginning of *One Hundred Years of the ANC*. Here Bonner argues that the history of the ANC struggle has been defined in no small measure by its ability to re-imagine itself in response to the contextual significance of four social groups: traditional leaders, particularly before the 1950s who enjoyed a leading role in the ANC; the black middle classes, who dominated the ANC in the early years, and who have recently made a comeback; the urban masses, often lionised in struggle discourse, but whose influence, while often dramatic and important, was also episodic; and the rural masses who are more socially conservative, with negative impact on gender relations and ethnic or 'tribal' identity politics within the ANC.

As well as affirming the role of history as myth to the success of the ANC, a recurring theme of the book, Bonner's insight raises the question of whether the transformation of the ANC wrought by the assumption of state power, and in particular the evident tensions between the middle-classes formed by the party-state and the urban poor behind the service delivery riots can be sufficiently reconciled under a re-imagining.<sup>5</sup> For a time, Julius Malema, militant leader of the ANC Youth League, seemed to play this role for the ANC by calling for radical solutions like nationalising the mines and land. However, in 2012 he was expelled from the ANC for various offences, mostly for repeatedly criticising President Zuma in public. He now leads a new political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters.

### **Booyesen: *The ANC and the Regeneration of Political Power***

*One Hundred Years of the ANC* does an excellent job of foregrounding a diversity of debates on the role of history as a resource for the ANC versus history as undoing ANC myth; the exceptional standing or otherwise of the ANC; and post-apartheid rule as capitalism continuity, partial social transformation, or significant political rupture. For the most sustained account of the latter, it is to Susan Booyesen's *The ANC and the Regeneration of Political Power* that we must turn. Setting out to describe and analyse the state of the contemporary ANC in terms of its relationship to political power, Booyesen pursues what is ultimately a project of mapping power along four dimensions or 'faces'.

Perhaps Booyesen's key insight is that the ANC is no longer a liberation movement, but neither is it simply a political party in a liberal-democratic institutional context. Rather, the ANC is a hybrid 'party-movement' that retains the capacity to relate to the people as a liberation movement 'as not just patron, but parent as well' (p. 486). In many ways this feature of the ANC continues to distinguish it from other political parties in South Africa. The other three 'faces' of power that Booyesen identifies include elections, state and government, and the ANC as organisation. Any assessment of the political standing of the ANC, Booyesen avers, must take into account all four faces of power and indeed she undertakes this task with a thorough and in-depth assessment based on recent events and cases from post-apartheid politics, the like of which does not exist elsewhere in contemporary South African studies.

Booyesen's analysis of the ANC leaves the reader confronting an enduring behemoth, weakening on all four fronts, but still with enough time to self-correct and shore up its hegemony. Briefly put, Booyesen argues that in respect of 'the people', the ANC relationship remains historically strong, but is being eroded; electorally it is fraying at the edges and has lost most minority voters; in government it is continuously reinventing policies and structures to oversee these, and experiencing enduring tensions between deployment of party loyalists to office and the performance of key officials in office; and lastly, organisationally the party is experiencing growing internal factional contest for positions linked to state resources. Further, many branches are weak and the quality of ordinary cadres is low. In addition, there are important insights on incidents or dynamics, too numerous to repeat all here, but of great interest to scholars. One example is her idea that the ANC relates to the people not just as a patron but as a parent (p. 486), offering particular insight into the meaning of the social contract between 'the nation' and ANC as social movement.

By taking the question of political power seriously and mapping it across four dimensions, *The ANC and the Regeneration of Political Power* facilitates a more nuanced kind of analysis that, for example, can help understand the resilience of the ANC. Hence, a key claim of the book is the way that some failures in government can be contained for the party by its enduring strong relationship with the people as a liberation movement. Notably, Booyesen finds

no simple correlation between the performance of the ANC across all four faces of power and the terms of Presidents, suggesting that the ANC's problems are not reducible to who holds office (p. 493). There is thus more to fixing the ANC than replacing President Zuma, for example. Another important insight is that the ANC is aware of its strengths and weaknesses, and there are attempts at self-correction, both in government and organisationally. Furthermore, the reasons for self-correction are not just to stay in power 'until Jesus comes', as President Jacob Zuma put it, but also to try and do the right thing by the National Democratic Revolution. The problem is there is not one vision of what this moral project should be (and perhaps no appropriate vision, according to Butler).

Notably, while Booysen does reflect in passing on the issue of how ANC rule has reconfigured class power (p. 12), how it relates to the market locally, not least through Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), as well as internationally (p. 16–18), there is no space in her conceptual scheme for relations with economic actors as a 'face' of power, which is problematic given comparative experience that the 'party-state' becomes a significant economic actor itself,<sup>6</sup> and potentially in ways that stretch beyond rent-seeking as imagined in the developmental state discourse of the National Development Plan.<sup>7</sup> Concomitantly, there is also limited reflection on the key social actors linked to the wider political-economy *a la* Bonner and Southall, with these distinctions elided under the category of relations with 'the people'. Even an explicit focus on the political power of the ANC requires a conception that accommodates the socio-economic impact of rule. It also helps prevent a temptation to see social change after apartheid solely in political terms, which is clearly more profound than economic, although following Southall there is clearly much happening on the economic front too.

### **From Right to Might: A Crisis of Faith, Not Power**

Rule has changed the ANC. It is no longer a liberation movement, and well on its way to becoming a 'party-state' not unlike those identified by Zolberg (1966) elsewhere in Africa. This current ambiguity is probably best characterised using Booysen's term of a 'movement-party'. As Lissoni and her colleagues demonstrate, most can agree that the ANC is facing an identity crisis, and most can agree that it has successfully reinvented itself in the past when faced with similar challenges. But the current crisis is calling into question the history told by the ANC – its nationalist mythology. This is important as this history has long been a key resource for reinvention – the 'idea of the ANC', as Butler puts it, has always been central to the ANC.

It is important to characterise the crisis accurately. As Booysen demonstrates, the ANC still enjoys tremendous power through elections and the state, and remains united in its political objective in remaining in office. The

challenges it faces are what to do with state power. Partly this is a story about factionalism, corruption and poor governance linked to internal struggles for power. In a context of a free press, vigilant opposition parties and some effective state institutions like the public protector's office,<sup>8</sup> all of this undermines the idea of the ANC as champion of the nation. However, partly this is also a story about ideological differences and contested visions or, following Butler, inappropriate visions of what to do to realise the 'second phase' of economic liberation of the National Democratic Revolution in an era of neoliberal globalisation.

This lack of common vision is located against a context of asymmetrical change in South Africa. The political rupture marked by the advent of the ANC from banning to office in four years has not been matched by similarly radical economic and social change. The welfarist/developmental model cobbled together under ANC rule has seen inequality widened by jobless growth while poverty has been reduced for all, but mainly through an ever-expanding provision of social grants. Black Economic Empowerment policies have sought racially to transform capital, with some moderate success. Combined with the racial transformation and growth of the state, the effect has been to produce a rapidly growing state-linked black middle (and upper-middle) class as described by Southall, while most people's lives have continued more or less unchanged.

At the same time, urbanisation has grown significantly, including for the first time large numbers of migrants from the rest of Africa, resulting in the growth in informal settlements of the poor in the cities. While there has been some racial desegregation of residential areas by upwardly mobile groups, the most profound social changes from the apartheid era centre on the simultaneous growth of the black middle class and a heterogeneous black urban poor. There is much about these emergent class divisions and patterns of urban settlement that is shared more widely with cities of the South.

South Africa has witnessed periods of rapid urbanisation episodically in the 1920s, 1940s and 1960s, all of which impacted dramatically on national politics. The rising tide of popular protest against 'poor service delivery' suggests a similar potential exists today – but can the ANC reinvent itself to capture this growing energy? Or will new social movements and political parties like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) come to champion the urban poor? Much clearly depends on the ANC's ability to deal with the internal pathologies of the 'party-state' and, at the same time, advance a growth coalition with business and labour inclusive enough of the middle classes and urban poor to work. Clearly this is the objective of the National Development Plan (NDP), but so far the signs that this will form the basis of a future pact are not encouraging – indeed the launch of the NDP sparked a crisis in the union movement that led the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) to threaten leaving the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and withdraw support for the ANC in the national election of 2014.

In his keynote address published in *100 Years of the ANC*, party intellectual Joel Netshitenzhe characterises the ANC as ‘a critical ingredient of the glue that holds the South African nation together’ (p. 15). This sentiment is echoed by Butler when he concludes *The Idea of the ANC* with the assumption that it is the ANC that must lead South Africa away from the threats of populist decline to ‘liberation through modernity’. Perhaps most compellingly of all, Booyesen demonstrates how and why the ANC is likely to retain political power for some time to come. However, the collective message of these new books is that might is not right, and more specifically that the ANC’s moral authority, including its history as myth, is in decline. In short, in normative terms, the ANC is no longer exceptional, at least no longer reliably, and in political, economic and sociological terms, South Africa is just another postcolonial country.

All of this begs a question not answered by these four books: if the ANC’s liberation movement past is no longer a guide, indeed may even be an enemy, to the ANC as party-state, then what future lies in wait for the ‘disenchanted’ party? In turn, what fortune awaits postcolonial South African politics? The best sources for these answers, I would suggest, lie in other histories, specifically the history of liberation movements turned ruling parties elsewhere in Africa, or perhaps even more relevantly, in postcolonial middle-income countries across the global South such as Mexico and India.

The lesson from these contexts is more evil than heroic, although relatively banal evils like the anti-constitutional authoritarianism of Indira Ghandi, or the growing electoral corruption and fraud of the PRI in Mexico. Emergent against these maladies were either parties that mobilised on the basis of a conservative identity politics as with the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) in India, or those based on a conservative ‘good governance’ agenda like the PAN (National Action Party) in Mexico. In South Africa, the Economic Freedom Fighters and Democratic Alliance already occupy both these positions. While the precise form of decline and contest will be particular, informed not least by an enduring race politics, the lesson from the rest of the postcolonial world is that, while things might not fall apart (Achebe 1958), they will get worse before they get better. Lastly, as with India, Mexico and the like, the moment for renewal will be the loss of dominance by the ANC at the national polls.

## Notes

1. A prior version of the essay appeared in French in *Politique Africaine*, 2014/2 (No. 134), and is republished here in English with permission of Editorial Committee and Publisher.
2. Other recent examples of contemporary political analysis include: Qobo and Mashele (2014). For more historical work see MacMillan (2013). And for one that crosses both categories see Ngcaweni (2014).

3. See review by Emma Lundin in *LSE Review of Books*. (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lse-review-of-books/2013/09/15/book-review-external-mission-the-anc-in-exile/>).
4. Philip Bonner is one the leading social historians in South Africa and now retired Professor of History at the University of the Witwatersrand. Joel Netshitenzhe is former head of the Policy Unit in the Presidency from 2001–2009. He is currently executive director and board vice-president at the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Direction.
5. For more on service delivery protests in South Africa see Alexander (2010).
6. See Southall (2012).
7. <http://www.npconline.co.za/medialib/downloads/home/NPC%20National%20Development%20Plan%20Vision%202030%20-lo-res.pdf>
8. The mandate of the public protector's office is 'to strengthen constitutional democracy by investigating and redressing improper and prejudicial conduct, maladministration and abuse of power in state affairs' ([http://www.ppprotect.org/about\\_us/Vision\\_mission.asp](http://www.ppprotect.org/about_us/Vision_mission.asp)). It is one of a number of so-called 'Chapter 9' institutions, named after Chapter 9 of the Constitution. More accurately termed 'state institutions supporting constitution democracy', other organisations include the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC); the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission); the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE); the Auditor-General, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC); and an Independent Authority to Regulate Broadcasting.

## References

- Achebe, C. 1958. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
- Alexander, P. 2010. 'Rebellion of the Poor: South Africa's Service Delivery Protests – A Preliminary Analysis', *Review of African Political Economy* 37(123): 25–40.
- Barchiesi, F. 2012. 'Imagining the Patriotic Worker: The Ideal of "Decent Work" in the ANC's Political Discourse', in A. Lissoni et al. (eds), *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press and South African History Online, 111–35.
- Booyesen, S. 2011. *The African National Congress and the Regeneration of Political Power*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Butler, A. 2012. *The Idea of the ANC*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Ellis, S. 2012. *External Mission: The ANC in Exile*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.
- Lissoni, A., J. Soske, N. Erlank, N. Niefertgodien and O. Badsha (eds). 2012. *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press and South African History Online.
- MacMillan, H. 2013. *The Lusaka Years: The ANC in Exile in Zambia 1963–1994*. Johannesburg: Jacana.
- Netshitenzhe, J. 2012. 'Second Keynote Address: A Continuing Search for Identity: Carrying the Burden of History', in A. Lissoni et al. (eds), *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press and South African History Online, 13–28.
- Ngcaweni, B. 2014. *The Future We Chose: Emerging Perspectives on the Centenary of the ANC*. Johannesburg: AISA.

- Qobo, M. and P. Mashele. 2014. *The Fall of the ANC: What Next?* Johannesburg: Picador Africa.
- Saul, J. S. 2012. 'Globalisation, Recolonisation and the Paradox of Liberation in Southern Africa', in A. Lissoni et al. (eds), *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press and South African History Online, 347–366.
- Southall, R. 2012. 'ANC: Party Vanguard of the Black Middle Class?', in A. Lissoni et al. (eds), *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press and South African History Online, 325–346.
- Twala, M. and E. Bernard. 1994. *Mbokodo: Inside MK: Mwezi Twala – A Soldier's Story*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.
- Zolberg, A. 1966. *Creating Political Order: The Party States of West Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.