

SOUTH AFRICA: WHERE WERE WE LOOKING IN 1968?

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A joke and an anecdote drawn from apartheid’s rich but tragic archive both sets the mood of this essay and explains how it was that what was then arguably the world’s most political country, South Africa, largely escaped 1968, potentially the twentieth century’s most political year. Here is the joke: from the cockpit, passengers in the cabin of a full jetliner that has just landed at Johannesburg international airport sometime in the apartheid era hear this announcement: “Ladies and Gentlemen, we have just landed in South Africa. Please turn your watches back five years.”

The anecdote relates to an intelligent University of Natal student, the late Monica Fairall, who was Miss South Africa 1968 and thus South Africa’s entrant in the Miss Universe competition, which happened to be held in her home country that year. After the opening ceremony, Ms. Fairall was asked by the event’s South African organizers not to wear her evening gown again because it was considered “too extreme” as it showed too much “back.”

Backdrop to 1968

The years between 1964 and 1972 were ones in which the relationship between apartheid and modernity deepened. The country’s economic growth rate averaged between 6 and 8 percent per annum. This fed a frenzy of construction and pointed the country’s constitutional politics towards the Cold War authoritarianism that would follow in the 1980s.

It was a boom that followed a four-year period of unprecedented repression. A campaign of defiance led by the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) against the highly restrictive pass laws ended in March 1960 with the shootings at Sharpeville that left 69 dead and 150 wounded. This left no doubt that South Africa’s minority government would use violence to quell resistance. Thereafter, the two largest political groupings—the African National Congress (ANC) and the PAC—representing the African majority, were banned, and draconian security laws that gave the police unfettered powers were enacted. It was clear that, in the eyes of the regime, non-racial protest had become “communist agitation.”

It was at this time in 1960 that the ANC's Nelson Mandela, who would eventually become South Africa's first democratically elected president, went underground. He traveled abroad and visited, among other places, Algeria, where he met Ahmed Ben Bella, the country's newly elected president. This was not an incidental meeting: the successful Algerian war of liberation had sent a strong message to similar movements throughout the world, which is why its impact on the events in Paris in 1968 was indisputable. On his return, Mandela was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to five years in prison on relatively minor charges. But he was soon brought to trial again following a police raid of a house in Rivonia (near Johannesburg). The trial, which ended in June 1964, saw him and eight others of the High Command of the recently formed revolutionary army, Umkhonto we Sizwe, sentenced to life imprisonment. He was to spend the next twenty-seven years in prison.

In 1966, South Africa's National Party government obtained a clear majority of seats in parliament—astonishingly, this was close to two decades after it was first elected to government. That year, the intellectual behind apartheid's quest for modernity, social psychologist Hendrik Verwoerd, who had been elected prime minister in 1958, was stabbed to death on the floor of the same parliament. His replacement was the no-nonsense John Vorster, who had previously been the Minister of Justice and whose early-1960s crackdown on opposition had turned South Africa into a police state. A biographer has described Vorster as a “cold, formal, even rude” man who was “unsmiling, inflexible, fearsome and intolerant” towards opponents and critics.

In many ways, these same adjectives could be used to describe South Africa in 1968. It was a stark and grim place. Political repression had all but defeated opposition to apartheid; high levels of control and censorship prevented the spread of any literature that hinted at the emancipatory goals that would mark the events in Paris in May 1968. So, to use an apposite example, the reading of Mao, whose book *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, which was known as the “Little Red Book,” was so important in Europe in 1968, was almost unknown in South Africa.

Not much recognized at the time, however, events in the southern African region were signaling the possibility of change in South Africa. In 1965, the minority-controlled government of neighboring

Rhodesia had unilaterally declared independence from the United Kingdom and had been made subject by the United Nations (UN) to a regime of strict international sanctions. In October 1966, the UN General Assembly resolved that South Africa had forfeited its right to administer South-West Africa and terminated the mandate originally granted by the former League of Nations. In its place, it set up an eleven-member UN council to take over the administration of the territory. In June 1967, the General Assembly resolved to change the name of the territory to Namibia, a name that soon gained international currency everywhere except in Pretoria, a city located in the northern part of South Africa. By late 1966, guerrilla fighters were engaged in armed conflict against what they considered to be illegal regimes in both Rhodesia and Namibia. The slowly deteriorating situation on South Africa's borders was marked in 1967 by South Africa's commitment of police forces to combat infiltration into Rhodesia. A year later, counterinsurgency training was introduced into both police and military training with police units also being deployed to Namibia to battle the insurgency there.

International influences and new protest tactics

Let us now consider the direct impact the events of 1968 had on the South African public and on its politics. Overall, only a small but informed public, both black and white, followed these events as they unfolded, but they remained largely peripheral in terms of the political process itself. Still, they had some effect.

Student activists at the time—John Daniel was then serving as president of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), an anti-apartheid grouping of white English-speaking and some black campuses—followed the events in France in May and June 1968 with awe and fascination. In those pre-television days in South Africa, hourly news bulletins of the BBC World Service were the only dependable source of information. The idea of a student-worker alliance toppling a major Western government seemed impossible to South African students confronted with an intractable government at home. But “Danny the Red” (Daniel Cohn-Bendit), Rudi Dutschke, and Columbia University's Mark Rudd provided new heroes and a new set of protest tactics that students at the University of Cape Town would soon put to use.

Probably more influential than the events in France in the minds of the larger South African public, however, were the back-to-back

assassinations in the United States of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. The liberal promise of the US during those years meant that South Africans closely followed political developments on the other side of the Atlantic. The Cold War notwithstanding, the US was regarded then as a potential ally in the struggle to end apartheid; black South Africa, especially, identified intensely with the American civil rights campaign. When Martin Luther King Jr. railed against the denial of rights in the United States, he was seen as speaking for black South Africans and their inequalities, too. Though banned by the local censorship authorities, copies—in the form of a long-playing record—of Dr. King’s 1963 “I Have a Dream” Washington Monument speech had been smuggled into South Africa and circulated like Soviet samizdat texts (individually produced and uncensored dissident texts distributed in the Soviet Bloc).

The 1966 NUSAS congress listened with great admiration to one of these smuggled recordings. King’s assassination in April 1968 sparked a wave of deep sorrow and emotion in South Africa’s black townships. Hundreds wept openly at memorial services. Few who heard it will ever forget how the state-controlled, South African Broadcasting Corporation announced

his death in its 7:00 a.m. news bulletin. Without even a perfunctory gesture towards the message of King’s lifework, but with menace, it proclaimed in a racist tone with barely concealed relish that “Widespread rioting has broken out in the United States following the assassination of the Negro



Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and his wife Ethel arrive at the Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Pretoria during their visit to South Africa, June 5, 1966.

civil rights agitator, Martin Luther King.”

Two months later, the murder of Robert Kennedy unleashed a second wave of sorrow among South African activists. Kennedy’s whirlwind campaign-style visit to South Africa two years earlier had, in the words of a press commentator, Stanley Uys, “blown clean air into a dank

and closed room.” Wherever he went on that visit, he attracted huge and enthusiastic crowds, even in the government-supporting student heartland of Stellenbosch. His tour of Soweto sent out a clear message to black South Africans that in his eyes, they mattered, and that what they stood for was right. His helicopter visit to the then isolated Natal village of Groutville—to which ANC president and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Chief Albert Luthuli was restricted—was seen as an endorsement of all the ANC stood for. His description of the chief as “the most impressive man I have ever met” outraged the regime and thrilled those who had no voice in the government. Prime Minister Verwoerd’s sulky refusal to meet with Kennedy diminished the premier and made him seem small-minded and petty.

For the National Party, Kennedy’s visit in June 1966 was a propaganda disaster, but for the anti-apartheid opposition it was both a timely reminder that the world was on its side and a much-needed morale booster after the jail sentences that had recently been imposed on Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders. While difficult to quantify, one should never underestimate the power of hope even in bleak times—Kennedy’s visit was certainly one such pillar of hope.

Explosive events at the University of Cape Town

While these tragic killings in the United States had a significant impact on the political consciousness of some South Africans, it was developments at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in August 1968 that promised, albeit briefly, to bring home the explosive events in Europe. On August 14 approximately 1,000 overwhelmingly white students met and condemned the decision of the highest decision-making body, the University Council, to withdraw an offer of a senior lectureship in anthropology to a black South African, Archie Mafeje, then completing his doctorate at Cambridge University. After the meeting, more than 300 students marched on the administration building, but instead of the customary pause in the courtyard to petition the principal, they pushed through the front doors and took possession of the building. It was South Africa’s first sit-in, which lasted ten days. Supportive UCT academics, as well as a recently-returned graduate from the Sorbonne and witness to the events of Paris in May, Richard (“Ric”) Turner, conducted non-stop seminars introducing a whole new generation of student activists to the works of Marx and prominent leftist scholars of the time. Nine years later, in January 1977, Turner, then a lecturer in political

science at the University of Natal in Durban, was gunned down by an apartheid assassin.

Led by student body leader Duncan Innes and Radical Society chair Rafi Kaplinsky (immediately dubbed “Red Rafi” in the media), the sit-in outraged the government but captured the media’s interest more effectively than any previous student protest. It acutely embarrassed the university administration and exposed the cowardly political nature of the leadership of this self-proclaimed anti-apartheid institution. Having originally appointed the best applicant for the post, the university administration capitulated, in the face of a threat from the government, to legislate a prohibition on the employment of black lecturers in white universities. Instead of standing firm, the council did the government’s dirty work for it and reneged on its original principled stance. The council’s decision split the campus: the dean of the Humanities Faculty, Professor Maurice Pope, resigned from the university in protest. He, as well as a minority of demurring voices in the council like Leo Marquard, and the student occupiers of the administration facility, deserve to be remembered with credit for their actions.

But why were South Africa’s universities so intimidated whereas universities in much of the rest of the world were the cauldrons of new ideas, if not battlefields? To reflect on this, we need to consider the prevailing culture of South Africa’s universities of the time.

Challenging the university system from within

In South Africa’s English-language universities, the hold of the “network of imperial knowledge,” as the South African historian Saul Dubow has put it, was strong. Their cultural roots drew them towards the intellectual conservatism of Oxbridge. In the words of Laurence Wright, an English professor at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape, they were instruments for “transmitting metropolitan knowledge and excitement in a colonial situation.”

Arguably, this imperial mold was only broken in Britain by the intellectual ferment (and the progressive politics) that followed upon the establishment of the University of Sussex in 1961. Not coincidentally, a number of South Africans who were to make a deep impression on both South African scholarship and the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1970s and 1980s did postgraduate work at Sussex; it was from this institution that the country’s president from 1999 to 2008, Thabo Mbeki, graduated with an MA in

economics, as did two brothers who were to become his closest political confidants—Aziz and Essop Pahad—and the scholar/activist, Robert Davies, currently Minister of Trade and Industry in President Jacob Zuma’s administration.

Some aspects of the role Mbeki played in the events of 1968 from his base in Sussex have recently come to light. His biographer Mark Gevisser claims that Mbeki used the mood of the times to insert the anti-apartheid message into other political developments. “It was classic entryism, and it worked: Mbeki would be meeting with the likes of Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Rudi Dutschke, the leaders of that year’s student uprisings in Paris and Berlin, and the ANC would be represented on the steering committee of the coalition that organised that year’s massive anti-Vietnam war marches in London.”

In South Africa itself, inspiring teachers often challenged the status quo by instilling, in the words of the late American philosopher Richard Rorty, “doubts in the students ... about the society to which they belong.” These departures were openly political, and, interestingly, they drew on European thinking. In 1968, a course called “Freedom and Authority,” which was almost entirely devoted to the work of Hannah Arendt, was offered at the University of the Witwatersrand. But those in power did not appreciate such dissenting approaches. Academics and students who pursued them were often censured both within and without the university walls.

South Africa's black universities

What was the position with students at other South African universities? The oldest of South Africa’s black universities, Fort Hare, was founded by Scottish missionaries in 1916; in 1946, it gained semi-autonomous status with its degrees issued under the supervision of Rhodes University. But the University of Fort Hare played a much larger part in ending apartheid than this mundane and linear narrative suggests. It was here that Nelson Mandela and numerous leaders studied: Mandela, who had organized a boycott, was expelled by the college’s principal during his final year of study. The institution’s social and political capital, however, was obliterated by the 1959 Universities Act that, despite according it full university status, effectively curtailed its academic and intellectual authority at the very moment that four other universities for “non-whites” (those of Zululand, the Western Cape, Durban-Westville, and the North) were established.

These “tribal colleges,” as they were derisively dubbed, were staffed by Afrikaner academics deployed to them almost as a form of “national service.” Administratively, these institutions were tightly controlled: leadership positions were primarily filled with ideologues, and budgets were drawn, not from the national education budget, but from that of the state department designated to deal with black affairs. For almost a decade and a half, these institutions operated outside the academic mainstream. As a result, they seemed to have no real stake in the national conversation that was at the very heart of the country’s future until probably the most seminal event in South Africa in 1968 liberated them from this netherworld.

This was the action of a young medical student, Steve Biko, who led South Africa’s black campuses out of the white-dominated student federation NUSAS to strike out on their own in the form of the South African Students Organisation (SASO). SASO reflected a new assertiveness on the part of young black South Africans. It reflected, too, the view held by postcolonial theorist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon that for a people to be free, they have to believe they deserve to be free. SASO challenged the mental self-enslavement of black South Africans. It called upon blacks to stand up to “whitey” and to reject internal oppression. It was an idea whose time had come as reflected in the youth rebellion that spread across the country in 1976, sparked by events in Soweto. Again with the benefit of hindsight, it is now possible to see the Soweto uprising as a watershed in the struggle to rid South Africa of colonial and minority domination.

Afrikaner perspectives

The position in Afrikaner circles was different. The project of uniting Afrikaners as a collective into a coherent white “nation”—“imagining a community,” to twist Benedict Anderson’s phrase—was strong. They were encouraged to follow the ideal of a *volksuniversiteit*, which Afrikaner intellectual Van der Merwe Scholtz defined as “a university which belongs to the *volk* and must therefore be of the *volk*, out of the *volk* and for the *volk*, anchored in its traditions and fired by the desire to serve the *volk* in accordance with its own view of life.” In this intellectual project, scarcely a discipline failed to encourage the idea that a university education provided students with the anchor of, in Stellenbosch University Professor Johan Degenaar’s words, “being bound to the people.”

Breaking with this line of thought was difficult, if not impossible, as poet and literature professor N. P. van Wyk Louw described in a convoluted fashion: Effective criticism, he argued, “emerges when the critic places himself in the midst of the group he criticises, when he knows that he is bound unbreakably ... to the *volk* he dares rebuke.” Although this “*loyale verset*”—or loyal dissent—was the early form of breakout, Afrikaner intellectuals eventually became more daring. In 1964, the farmer and novelist Etienne Leroux published a novel called *Sewe Dae by die Silbersteins*, which many came to regard as the founding of a new writing movement, *Die Sestigters* [The Sixties Generation]. Although many saw Leroux’s book as a breakthrough for an Afrikaner New Left, revisionist interpretations now see it as “giving literary expression to the Afrikaner nightmare.” Another poet, the intellectual and activist Breyten Breytenbach, who was jailed for high treason in the early 1970s and who lived in Paris in 1968, was the most famous example of a rebelling writer. Another Afrikaner writer, novelist André Brink, also lived in Paris at that time. The eventual revolt of Afrikaner youth, however, would come in the 1980s with a fusion of protest rock and political activism known now under the generic term *Voëlvrý* [Free as a Bird].

Boycotting South African cricket

The other event that got caught in the political breeze in 1968 was Prime Minister Vorster’s decision to veto the selection of black South African émigré Basil D’Oliviera as a member of the English cricket team, which was due to tour in the summer of 1968–69. A brilliant cricketer denied the opportunity to represent the country of his birth on account of race, D’Oliviera had moved to England and qualified for British citizenship. Vorster’s veto outraged British public opinion and forced a reluctant and historically collaborationist English cricket administration, kicking and screaming all the while, to cancel the tour. It was a decisive moment in the campaign to isolate South African sports. More than twenty years were to pass before a legitimate national team would again play cricket against a South African national team. The international sports boycott of South Africa is acknowledged to have been a crucial pressure point in the increasingly effective campaign of comprehensive sanctions directed against the apartheid system.

Overall, however, 1968 was a low time in the struggle for democracy in South Africa. Many historians have referred to the period between the sabotage trials of the mid-1960s and the labor unrest of the

early 1970s as one when nothing significant happened in opposition circles. For example, Julie Frederikse has described this period as “the lull.” However, hindsight is a wonderful thing, and it is now possible to see how seemingly unrelated occurrences in South Africa in 1968—the student protest at UCT, the emergence of black consciousness under the leadership of Steve Biko, the D’Oliviera affair, the rise of cultural resistance inside South Africa, and the growing armed insurgencies in the region—set developments in motion that contributed significantly to ending the apartheid system. Not recognized as such at the time, each of these events or developments was a critical harbinger of change.

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