

Somewhere over the rainbow: the nationstate,
democracy and race in a globalising South
Africa.

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Jeff Guy

Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Somewhere over the rainbow:
the nation-state, democracy and race in a globalising
South Africa**

Jeff Guy (bio)

South Africa, 1990-4: a negotiated compromise¹

The South Africa of the 1980s might well be described as Hobbesian. In spite of the enormous power at its command, the South African government was unable to implement effectively a system of authoritarian racial overrule which had its roots in colonial dispossession, had been extended by imperial conquest, and which reached its height in the last half of the last century in an attempt to implement racial segregation through ethnic differentiation by means of a state-system known as apartheid. By this system a racial minority of about an eighth of the population sought to keep control of political power, land and resources, using increasingly authoritarian measures. By the 1980s however apartheid was being severely challenged. The subordinated racial majority was in the streets in open defiance of the state. The organised black working class in conjunction with a vast number of those (the young in particular) for whom the existing system offered nothing but further impoverishment and humiliation was increasingly vocal and militant. Confronted internally by this Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) the South African authorities were also under external pressure not only from the exiled liberation movement led by the ANC which kept up the pressure for revolutionary change, but by international opinion which sought to use financial sanctions to rein in the racial excesses of the apartheid state. Already burdened by intense structural weaknesses the economy slowed then went into severe recession.

The governing party mixed tentative reforms with vicious attempts to fragment and crush the opposition internally, and weaken it externally through military violence. But locked within an inflexible set of ideological **[End Page 68]** and economic constraints it could do nothing to slow the spiral of increasing violence which only made more obvious its incapacity to find a solution within existing structures. It was a time of heightened emotions: of exhilaration as the oppressor was at last confronted directly by the masses, driven on by the hope of liberation; it was also a

time of horror as the apartheid state lashed out at those who threatened it and the nightmare of all-out racial civil war appeared increasingly likely.

Then, at the last moment, as the 1980s drew to a close, the combatants looked into the abyss - and drew back. Liberal elements within South Africa, joined by elements from governing circles, with big capital heavily involved, made contact with the exiled liberation movement. Gaoled political leaders were approached, and drawn into the process. In February 1990, after 30 years of banning, the major political organisations were legalised, and their leaders released. Negotiations began between these divided South Africans. They now included representatives of the apartheid government under FW de Klerk, South African business interests, white opposition parties, and the liberation movements of which the African National Congress (ANC) was by far the most dominant, and was soon joined in alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP), and organised labour - the Congress of SA Trade Unions (COSATU). Also represented were African organisations, which had grown up under the apartheid system, the most significant being the Zulu nationalist movement, Inkatha.

From 1990 to 1994 these disparate groups, representing the widest range of interests, negotiated a new constitution for South Africa and the steps to be taken for its implementation. Both sides had to make major concessions. De Klerk began the process with the intention of retaining substantial white power - a position he was forced to abandon. The liberation movement had to give substance to rhetoric and moved away from many of its historical positions, including the vague but influential references to acquisition of land and resources by the expropriated struggling masses. The negotiations were carried out against a background of violence which at times seemed to threaten the whole process: on one occasion the negotiating chambers themselves were forcibly entered by a disaffected right-wing group; it is estimated that while the negotiations were in progress some 14 000 South Africans were killed. But, in the end, the process was sustained, with both sides



Jeff Guy

Debate

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