



# **South Africa in Question**

At the  
University of Cambridge  
African Studies Centre  
Edited by John Lonsdale  
Adam Kuper · Shula Marks  
Harold Wolpe · Liz Gunner  
Gavin Cawthra · Colin Murray  
Roger Riddell · Frene Ginwala  
William Beinart · Elaine Unterhalter  
Merle Lipton · Christopher Saunders



# *South Africa in Question*

**EDITED BY  
JOHN LONSDALE**

Director of Studies in History  
Trinity College, Cambridge

**AFRICAN STUDIES CENTRE  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE**

IN ASSOCIATION WITH

**JAMES CURREY  
LONDON**

**HEINEMANN  
PORTSMOUTH (N.H.)**

Published by University of Cambridge African Studies Centre (CASC)  
Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RQ

In association with

James Currey Ltd  
54 Thornhill Square, Islington, London N1 1BE

Heinemann Educational Books Inc  
70 Court Street, Portsmouth, New Hampshire 03801

© University of Cambridge African Studies Centre 1988  
First published 1988

### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

South Africa in question.

1. Apartheid — South Africa — History
  2. South Africa — Race relations — History
- I. Lonsdale, John II. University of  
Cambridge. *African Studies Centre*  
323.1'68 DT763

ISBN 0-85255-325-0 (James Currey Cased)

ISBN 0-85255-326-9 (James Currey Paper)

### **Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

South Africa in question.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Apartheid—South Africa. 2. South Africa—  
Politics and government—1978- . I. Lonsdale,  
John.

DT763.S6428 1988 305.8'00968 87-29396

ISBN 0-435-08023-7 (Heinemann Inc Paper)

The extract from the poem 'Sounds of a Cowhide Drum' by Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali on page 229 comes from the book of that title published by Renoster Books, Johannesburg in 1971 and Oxford University Press, London in 1972. It is reproduced by kind permission of Oxford University Press.

Keyed in 10/12 Times by Ludgard De Decker, Paula Munro and Janet Seeley at the University of Cambridge African Studies Centre  
in association with the University of Cambridge Computer Laboratory  
and printed in Great Britain by Villiers Publications, London N1

## Foreword

The African Studies Centre of the University of Cambridge is concerned principally with the support of research and with the coordination of interdisciplinary teaching on Africa within the University; it also acts as a home for the many African students we welcome yearly to Cambridge. In its more than twenty-year history the Centre has always seen it as one of its main duties to organise an annual course of public lectures on a major theme of African interest, so as to bring the problems and excitements of Africa to a wider audience. In recent years courses of lectures have been given on such topics as Ecology and Conservation, Health and Nutrition, Agrarian Systems, and Migration and Ethnicity. In the academical year 1986/87, a course of 15 lectures was given under the title 'Southern Africa: behind the Crisis'; twelve of the lectures are presented in this collection. Pressures of time and events have unfortunately prevented the publication of the other three. Wally Serote, poet and politician, started us off by outlining how the African National Congress approached the future, and has been busy helping to create that future ever since. Ian Linden then talked on the theme of Christian liberation and vested ecclesiastical interest, taking some brief hours off from running the Catholic Institute of International Relations. John Battersby, of the South African Morning Newspaper group, spoke at first hand on the struggles by the media, black and white, against the government's increasing determination to appropriate the truth – just before he was recalled home from London. Those who were lucky enough to hear their lectures will know that this collection is the poorer for their absence.

While all the talks reproduced here have subsequently been revised, some of them substantially so, it must be remembered that all references to recent events are made from the standpoint of the period October 1986 to March 1987.

This is the first of the Centre's lecture series to be published; it will surely not be the last. Such rapid publication would have been unthinkable without a degree of efficiency from the contributors which is not usually associated with academics, or without the support of the Centre's Director, John Sender and its Chairman, Ray Abrahams. And it would have been quite impossible without the heroic efforts of Bobbie Coe and the Centre's staff, Ludgard De Decker, Paula Munro and Janet Seeley, to all of whom I give my grateful admiration.

*John Lonsdale*

Member, Management Committee, African Studies Centre

# Glossary of Abbreviations

AHI	Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut	PAWO	Port Alfred Women's Organisation
ANC	African National Congress	RENAMO	alternative name for MNR
ASSOCOM	Associated Chambers of Commerce	RSA	Republic of South Africa
BLS	Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland: formerly British territories, linked to South Africa in a Customs Union	RSC	Regional Services Council
CIIR	Catholic Institute of International Affairs	SAAU	South African Agricultural Union (of white farmers)
COSAS	Congress of South African Students	SADCC	Southern African Development Coordination Conference
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions	SADF	South African Defence Force
CUSA	Council of Unions of South Africa	SAIRR	South African Institute of Race Relations
DET	Department of Education and Training	SAP	South African Police
EDA	Environmental and Development Agency	SPP	Surplus People Project (of research into forced removals)
FCI	Federated Chambers of Industry	SRC	Student Representative Council
FedTraw	Federation of Transvaal Women	SSC	State Security Council
FLS	Frontline States	SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organisation
FRELIMO	Mozambique Liberation Front	TB	Tuberculosis
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	TBVC	Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei: the four 'independent' Bantustans
HNP	Herstigte ('Purified') Nasionale Party	TRAC	Transvaal Rural Action Committee
IDAF	International Defence and Aid Fund	UDF	United Democratic Front
IDP	Industrial Development Point	UG	Union Government
JMC	Joint Management Centre (of the security system)	UNITA	National Union for the Total Independence of Angola
MAWU	Metal and Allied Workers' Union	UP	United Party
MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe (military wing of the ANC)	UWCO	United Women's Congress (of Cape Province)
MNR	National Resistance Movement (of Mozambique)	UWO	United Women's Organisation (now within UWCO)
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola	VD	Venereal disease
NECC	National Education Crisis Committee	VOW	<i>Voice of Women</i> (journal of ANC women's section)
NOW	Natal Organisation of Women		
NP	National Party		
OFS	Orange Free State		

## Notes on Contributors

**Neil Andersson** is director of the Centre of Tropical Disease Research at the University of Guerrero in Mexico. An epidemiologist, he is author of *Namibian Health Sector Policy Options* (UN Institute for Namibia, 1984) and, with Shula Marks, of *Apartheid and Health* (World Health Organisation, 1983).

**William Beinart** teaches history at Bristol University, is an editor of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* and the author of many studies of South African rural history including *The Political Economy of Pondoland 1860-1930* (Cambridge, 1982); with Peter Delius and Stanley Trapido: *Putting a Plough to the Ground* (Johannesburg, 1986); and, with Colin Bundy: *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa* (London, 1987).

**Gavin Cawthra** left South Africa in 1977 in order to avoid conscription into the armed defence of apartheid, and is active in the Committee on South African War Resistance. He has written a number of studies on the region's militarisation, including *Brutal Force: the Apartheid War Machine* (London, 1986).

**Frene Ginwala** has been active in the cause of the African National Congress since the 1960s, when she was forced to leave South Africa. She has published a number of works on the South African situation including, for the United Nations, a study of the press in 1972.

**Elizabeth Gunner** lectures in Commonwealth literature at the University of London. She has published a *Teachers' Guide to African Literature* and, with H.L.B. Moodie and E. Finnegan, *A Handbook for Teaching African Literature*. She has worked extensively on Zulu praise poetry in its cultural context both past and present, and is engaged on a biography of the Zulu prophet Isaiah Shembe.

**Adam Kuper** is Professor of Social Anthropology at Brunel University, after having taught at Universities in Uganda, Holland, Sweden and the USA. He is the author of a number of books, the most recent being *Wives for Cattle: Bridewealth and Marriage in southern Africa* (London, 1982) and *South Africa and the Anthropologist* (London, 1987).

**Merle Lipton**, Research Fellow of the Centre for International Studies at the London School of Economics, has previously been attached to Sussex, Johns Hopkins and Yale universities and to Chatham House. She is author of *Capitalism and Apartheid: South Africa 1910-1986*

## Notes on Contributors

(paperback, 1986) and of the forthcoming Economist Intelligence Unit report, 'Sanctions against South Africa'.

**John Lonsdale** teaches history at the University of Cambridge and has written a number of studies on East African and African history. He is currently working on the history of the Mau Mau rising in colonial Kenya.

**Shula Marks** is Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and Professor of Commonwealth history at the University of London. She has written widely and edited a number of studies of South African history, being herself the author of *Reluctant Rebellion* (Oxford, 1970) and *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa* (Baltimore, 1986).

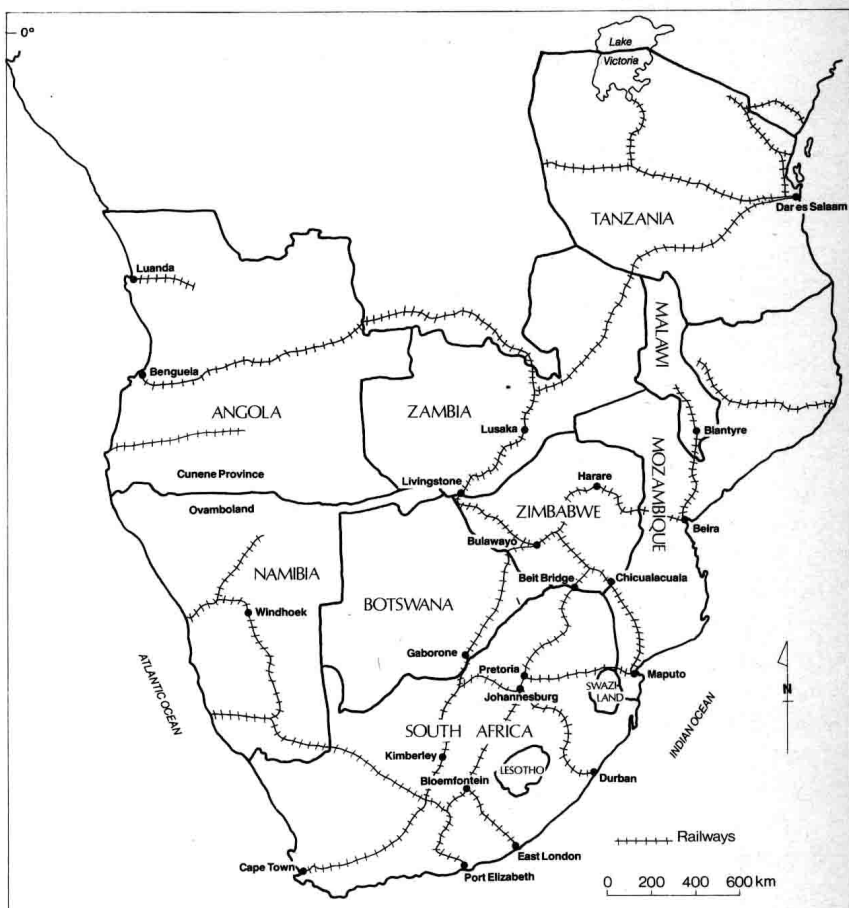
**Colin Murray** teaches in the field of Third World development at the University of Liverpool. Author of the study of migrant labour from Lesotho, *Families Divided* (Cambridge, 1981); he is currently writing a history of the Thaba 'Nchu district, Orange Free State, based on field and archival research.

**Roger C. Riddell** is a Research Fellow of the Overseas Development Institute, London. He was formerly Chief Economist of the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries and Chairman of the Presidential Commission into Incomes, Prices and Conditions of Service in Zimbabwe. Author of many works on southern Africa's economic problems, his most recent book is *Foreign Aid Reconsidered* (London, 1987).

**Christopher Saunders** teaches history at the University of Cape Town. He has published widely on South African history and is author of the forthcoming book on South African historiography, *The Making of the South African Past*.

**Elaine Unterhalter** is a Senior Research Officer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex. She has written extensively on South African Women, edited the Anti-Apartheid Movement Women's Committee newsletter and is author of *Forced Removal: the segregation, division and control of the people of South Africa* (London, 1987).

**Harold Wolpe** is Reader in Sociology at the University of Essex and co-ordinator of the London Education Committee of the African National Congress. He has published widely on the contemporary political economy of South Africa, including the forthcoming *Race, Class and the Apartheid State*.



**Map 1** *South Africa, with Bantustans*





# Contents

<i>List of Maps</i>	iii
<i>Foreword</i>	v
<i>Glossary of Abbreviations</i>	vi
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	vii

Introduction	John Lonsdale	1
1 Historians & Apartheid	Christopher Saunders	13
2 Anthropology & Apartheid	Adam Kuper	33
3 Capitalism & Apartheid	Merle Lipton	52
4 South Africa at War	Gavin Cawthra	64
5 The Regional Crisis	Roger Riddell	77
6 The Case for Sanctions	Frene Ginwala	95
7 Displaced Urbanisation	Colin Murray	110
8 Agrarian Historiography & Agrarian Reconstruction	William Beinart	134
9 Class, Race & Gender	Elaine Unterhalter	154
10 Diseases of Apartheid	Shula Marks & Neil Andersson	172
11 Educational Resistance	Harold Wolpe	200
12 Literature & Apartheid	Elizabeth Gunner	217
<i>Index</i>		234

*Guides to Further Reading will be found at the end of each chapter*

*Pages which raise the central issues of each major theme may be found by reference to the entries under 'Questions' in the Index*

## LIST OF MAPS

1 South Africa, with Bantustans	ix
2 Southern Africa: South Africa and the SADCC countries	x
3 Onverwacht-Botshabelo	112
4 KwaNdebele	113

# *Introduction: South Africa in Question*

**JOHN LONSDALE**

## *Aim*

South Africa is in crisis, perhaps in a revolutionary situation. The state has lost almost all its legitimacy, even amongst those one would imagine to be its most fervent supporters; its government has no clear vision of the future with which to invite a wider allegiance; and its power appears to be based increasingly upon force. More and more of South Africa's black population (and not a few among its whites) have withdrawn their support from the institutions by which their values and identities were previously moulded and their actions constrained. Events, in consequence, seem at times to be moving very fast indeed. Everybody who reads a newspaper knows that. The contributors to this book were asked **not** to recount these day-to-day events of the crisis, but to analyse the deeper structures of conflict which lie beneath its surface. For these have had a much longer history than the present political upheaval and are likely to have a more intractable future. South Africa's structures are not going to be easy to change, whatever the strength of political will which is applied either to their reform or to their revolution. At this very moment however, if in very contradictory ways, women, mothers, workers, peasants, capitalists, army conscripts, health-workers, students, poets and intellectuals – all of whom will be met in these pages – are themselves putting the future of their own particular South Africa in question. Even those who are oppressed by apartheid will disagree on their vision of the future, their definition of liberation; some of them may indeed find that their self-interest seems best tied to the social structures which apartheid has so painfully created. If many different futures are in question, we must ourselves then question the past which has brought into being so contested a present.

The public lecture series on which this book is based was designed to introduce academics and other experts on South Africa to an

## *Introduction*

intelligent lay audience, so as to oblige them to present their most deeply considered thoughts in as plain as possible a form. Each of the chapters which follow represents a fifty-minute lecture, printed more or less as it was delivered, with a minimum of reference matter but with suggestions for further reading. Each is designed to be used as the starting point for group discussion, whether in class or in meeting-room. Equally, this book will introduce in brief compass – to readers who have not got time for more – the research findings of scholars who will have written, or who are about to write, a full-length study of the issues which they have compressed into a chapter here. The University's African Studies Centre invited as speakers people who are well known for their questioning role in the study of South Africa, a country whose future is very much in question. The title of the book is intended to convey this double meaning.

The opening lecture was given by Wally Serote, a poet who finds he must also be a politician, a relationship explored by our last contributor, Liz Gunner. Serote talked of the ANC's perspective on change in South Africa. But politicians have more urgent demands on their time than the writing of treatises, so the ANC's views on the future are not directly represented here. It is true that the majority of our contributors are South African exiles, whether black or white, who have distanced themselves from their native land for the sake of conscience and, some of them, from necessity. Their scholarship cannot be other than politically committed (indeed, it is difficult to think of any scholarship anywhere which is not), but even those chapters which are written by active members of the ANC are not political programmes; even Frene Ginwala's eloquence does not claim to unlock the mystery of the future. Nor is there any other political blueprint here, whether from the ruling party or from any of its other opponents: the overriding mood of the book is one of informed uncertainty. But politicians are, after all, in the business of making their views known to anybody who cares to listen; and people who are concerned with the future of South Africa will already know what they say. This book is designed, rather, to help those interested students and members of the public to listen more critically to the politicians, to question them more acutely, and to read tomorrow's newspapers with a sharper eye.

The book starts with the past, with the intellectual and ideological struggles which underpinned and questioned the building of white supremacy and industrial capitalism. For the past is never sufficient unto itself; its ideologies tend to outlive the political demands which

gave them birth. Present-day South Africans are the victims not only of contemporary nightmares but also of those once dreamed by powerful yet haunted men who are long since dead. The past always constructs the future, but which past and which future is still very much in question, for the present always has the power to reconstruct the past. That is why the educationalists of black emancipation, discussed by Harold Wolpe towards the end of the book, have produced, as their first new school syllabus, a new history of South Africa. They understand, much better indeed than people who have never been consciously oppressed, how necessary it is to rediscover the past, to people it anew with men and women now silenced or demeaned by their rulers' self-regarding histories<sup>1</sup> – if the disregarded men and women of today, especially South Africa's literally and scandalously 'surplus people', are ever to dare to attempt to recover their future.

The middle chapters, by Gavin Cawthra, Roger Riddell and Frene Ginwala, detail the bitter course and consequences of the present crisis, both within South Africa and beyond, and call for the mitigation of its destructive effects by international action. In their accounts we can see the past come to angry fruition. They deal with much of the present agenda. But the remaining chapters, the bulk of the book, have as much to do with the questions which remain unanswered for the future. They are concerned with the forms of human life which the South African state has tried to impose, whether deliberately or by malign neglect and which South African men and women are struggling to endure or overcome and, in overcoming, to create new forms of political community, whether by private ingenuity or professional expertise, in mass organisation or in popular song.

### *The questions in South Africa*

What South Africans now have the power to make of themselves is largely determined by what their previous generations made of the past. But that past is radically uncertain in character, as our first three contributors in particular show. In his survey of how successive historians have tried to explain the peculiarities of the successive South Africas in which they lived, **Christopher Saunders** reveals how fundamentally scholars could disagree, even when they only considered

---

<sup>1</sup> For a recent account of such self-regarding history see, Leonard Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1985).

## Introduction

the most obvious historical actors, the white communities as a whole and those small minorities in their midst who organised the country's economic exploitation. Has white supremacy always been fatally flawed, even on its own terms, founded on a contradiction between archaic minority control and a would-be modernising capitalist expansion? Or have the oppressions inherent in white domination guaranteed the only kind of capitalist growth which was historically possible in an economy based on mineral extraction, requiring vast amounts of cheap labour from out of a peasant population? Or, in the insurrectionary present in which South Africa now finds itself, are these, as Saunders concludes by suggesting, quite the wrong questions? How far, instead, did the early practices of racial segregation and migrant male black labour reflect not so much a white strategy of dominance as a black determination to resist proletarianisation? And how far are the more recent phases of apartheid an ideological disguise for an uncontrollable reality – an unacknowledged autonomy of black urban life in 'white' South Africa? It is difficult to square the cultural vibrance of Lewis Nkosi's 'Fabulous Decade' of the 1950s, discussed in Gunner's last chapter, with omnipresent white control. The social history of modern *black* South Africa has only begun to be written.

One can begin to see some of the inner uncertainties of white power in Adam Kuper's chapter on anthropology and apartheid. Not only has the profession been divided between its Afrikaner and English-speaking scholars, between a stress on inherited culture and one on changing social function, but the Afrikaner ideologists, he shows, found it impossible to reconcile their respect for African cultures with either a belief in white superiority or with its material consequence, the black poverty with which they came face to face in their field work. And this, he implies, is of vital importance when one comes to the question of the future of apartheid. One of its chief architects, Prime Minister Verwoerd, had earlier been the professor of Sociology at the University of Stellenbosch. In his case, the organising power of his ideas clearly helped to organise his idea of power. But if power loses its central idea, how can it continue to be organised other than as a mere force – a theme which is later taken up by Gavin Cawthra?

It is not just at the ideological level that white power is riven with doubt, although that is perhaps the most vital weakness in any ruling regime. Merle Lipton's chapter, a summary of the main argument in her recent book of the same title, is an eloquent restatement of the liberal historians' thesis analysed by Saunders, that there is a conflict

between an expanding capitalist economy and the repressive politics of minority white supremacy. But it is important to be clear what Lipton is and is not saying. She does not say that some, an increasing number, of white capitalists are closet non-racial democrats. She argues, rather, that until very recently South African capitalism was internally divided with regard to black labour and the size of the domestic market. In the past decade, however, thanks to the increasing sophistication of South African capitalism as a whole and to the rising anger and determination of black workers, the interests of white employers have begun to converge. They are now more ready to accept progressive industrial relations and rising standards of consumption – and therefore real wages – among South Africa's blacks. But we must not expect that the political consequences of this economic interest will be actively pressed by capitalists; their overriding preoccupation lies in stability, and in trimming their sails to the prevailing political wind. It is up to blacks to change that wind by taking advantage of whatever greater room for manoeuvre the expanding needs of capitalism may have opened up for them. Wolpe's chapter on education justifies Lipton's argument that capitalist self-interest may have unintended consequences in sharpening black opposition; but the limits of purely capitalist-inspired reform are underlined in Ginwala's chapter and in our next, by Cawthra.

The South African regime is at war, both with its own people and with its neighbours. Appropriately enough, but to an extent which is not sufficiently realised by western public opinion, the government itself and the institutions of white society have been extensively militarised. That is the central message of Gavin Cawthra, a conscientious objector active in assisting fellow whites of military age who follow him into exile. His chapter here summarises his recent book, *Brutal Force*. His thesis expands on the argument of preceding chapters, that the South African state is beset with internal contradiction. The army's national security doctrine is coherent and sophisticated. It is based on the realisation that internal war cannot be won on the battlefield alone (especially when guerrilla opponents are so careful to avoid pitched battles) but must be fought on the field of political allegiance as well. This belief lay behind the recent extension of a communal franchise to South Africa's Indians and 'coloureds'. It is doubtless one of the calculations behind the policy of forcing 'independence' on the Bantustans. But where, as in Namibia or in the townships which sprawl around the white cities, the government has no worthwhile concessions to offer, the army and the police have no



## *Introduction*

instrument of control other than force. And that defeats its own object, as South Africa's generals very well know from their study of people's war elsewhere in the world.

Just how far, and how little, South Africa is prepared to go in prosecuting its external war with its black neighbours is explored by **Roger Riddell**. The theme of contradiction and doubt is nowhere more clearly visible than here. The black states of southern Africa have suffered enormous losses from South Africa's deliberate policy of destabilisation. But, Riddell suggests, the South African government is caught in the tension between its need for military security, which requires that its neighbours be forced to their knees, unable to act as secure external bases for guerrilla war, and the economic benefits it enjoys from the regional market. He concludes that we have to examine very cautiously the warnings from western leaders, that South Africa will merely export northwards the costs it will incur from any more comprehensive international campaign for economic sanctions.

Such a campaign is **Frene Ginwala's** concluding demand. It has recently, in July 1987, been backed by the second annual conference of the Congress of South African Trades Unions, representing the people who will be hit most directly by any deepening of the existing economic recession. Ginwala's perspective reinforces Riddell's opening observation, that the South African crisis is clouded with misinformation, by which sectional propaganda is transmuted into conventional wisdom. She takes in turn the various western objections to sanctions and shows how they stem from the west's self-interest rather than from its professed concern with the interests of the blacks of South Africa. Above all, and this is the crucial and hardest point for a western (and white) readership to grasp, she demands clear thinking on whom we accept as the legitimate authors of political change. If we resist sanctions, she urges, then we must believe – however much we may protest that we mean no such thing – that the white minority government retains the right to prescribe what it thinks best for the future. Sanctions, on the other hand, are the most practical assistance that outsiders can give to blacks who have committed their own energies, and their lives, as historical actors in their own right, to the struggle for revolution. Reform offers no fence to sit on.

The rest of the book shows just how difficult either thoroughgoing reform or an even more thoroughgoing revolution must inevitably be. Our remaining contributors look into the underside of the crisis. The first six chapters were concerned principally with what one may call the



high politics of the problem: the conflicts between different sections of capital, between businessmen and politicians, between politicians and generals, between the international strategies of revolution and reform. From now on we are more interested in deep politics, the experiences and struggles of ordinary people obliged by circumstance to organise themselves into their own complex, local constituencies of interest, which may or may not coincide with the generalised programmes which their high-political leaderships are obliged to invent for them.

Colin Murray's chapter describes the single most appalling contemporary experience for the majority of South Africa's peoples. The forced removal of millions of 'surplus people' from their places of livelihood in recent years is a sharp reminder that while modern capitalism may need better skilled workers it can also make do with fewer of them, especially in times of recession. And South Africa's huge underclass, as it has now become, has no votes with which to influence the government and therefore no redistributional welfare payments to relieve its poverty. Murray also reminds us how carefully we must question both official statements and our own preconceptions. The repeal of the pass laws does most emphatically not mean freedom of movement for black workers; and Bantustans are rural slums, not peasant arcadias. But his account raises more difficult questions still, the fuller exploration of which is one of the many dimensions of the crisis which is absent from this collection.

With the Bantustans we enter a looking-glass world where nothing is quite what it seems and reality is difficult to identify. On the one hand they appear to be the pawns of a cynical regime. Bits of them are chopped up and allocated to a neighbour, their inhabitants are given invented identities, leaderships are conjured up from nowhere and fattened up with licences, loans and subsidies. But beneath the farce lies tragedy. For invented identities can come to embody real conflicts, especially when the resources at issue are so meagre. Africans really are divided by local competitions, it is not all done by mirrors. Local businessmen who hope to enjoy a protected market under the flag of Bantustan 'independence' can be violently opposed by working families who need free access to the white cities and whose cause is, improbably, championed by their local royal family. Bantustan nationalism can result in brutal chauvinism against residents of the wrong 'tribe'. All nationalisms are political inventions, not just in