

Investing in South Africa

Against Normalization. Writing Radical Democracy in South Africa

by Anthony O'Brien

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Anthony O'Brien writes with moving commitment on a range of South African literary and cultural texts; from the reactions of writers such as Brink and Sachs to the 1994 elections, Ndebele's neo-Arnoldian prescription for a post-apartheid literature, the worker-poets and grass-roots cultural activism of the 1980s, the representations and elisions of race in Beckett, Havel and Maponya, South African feminisms, the work of Bessie Head, Arthur Nortje, Dambudzo Marachera, and Nadine Gordimer. If these are largely familiar and well-worn critical sign-posts in South African English literary studies, O'Brien succeeds in both elegantly summarising familiar critical debates and, here and there, adding an original insight (see particularly the Beckett-Havel-Maponya connection). While South African literary scholars will find the gaps and misreadings of local debates irritating – and the selection of the 'most radical texts in South African literature of the eighties' (5) is highly contentious –, there is here a genuine attempt to grasp the complexity of the South African context.

Apart from the competent reading of literary texts, as an 'outsider' O'Brien is forced to rely on selective perspectives for the political context he wishes to foreground. It is at this level, where O'Brien takes the greatest risk in attempting to distil the meaning of a dynamic historical moment, that his study is both provocative and revealing. This is a book that extols virtues of diacritical debate, seeing in it the potential spark of critical and transformative praxis, and it is on this level of constructive engagement that I would like to note some productive weaknesses of *Against Normalization*. As an outsider to South Africa myself I sympathise with O'Brien's misreadings – indeed many of them are recognisable as more refined versions of my own mistakes – but I would also like to propose a somewhat harsh corrective to a few wide-spread misconceptions.

O'Brien's foreword tells us that the book is the result of 'several trips to South Africa, Botswana, and the School of Oriental and African Studies at the

University of London', as well as 'the University of Dakar (as it was called then) in Senegal', and Botswana (X). In South Africa O'Brien visited the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town, the University of Fort Hare, Rhodes University, and the University of Natal (both its Durban and Pietermaritzburg campuses). The latter appears to have provided the most productive environment and gratitude is expressed 'particularly [to] Margaret Daymond, to whom I owe a deep debt of gratitude The influence of her beautifully edited collection of *South African Feminisms* can be felt throughout this book' (xi). I mention these prefatory details in order to introduce the theme of location and solidarity which is essential to O'Brien's study. Foregrounding the question of positionality is the central modality of *Against Normalization* which is informed by an inclusive partisan intent and a complex and shifting temporal and emotive register.

The confessional opening words of the 'Introduction' lay out the key terms:

The shape this book has taken reflects the momentous changes in South Africa during the time of its composition. Writing between 1992 and 1998 on radical impulses in South African literature and politics in the 1980s, I began with a sense of the high tide of antiapartheid struggle in the late eighties as the vivid present, both of South African culture and of its representations abroad. Gradually, however, it became clear that 1990. With the release of Mandela and the somewhat demobilizing onset of negotiations, marked the waning of the resonant insurgency and militant hope of the Mass Democratic Movement of that period. With a growing awareness of how the South African transition was shifting the questions posed to radical imagination and interpretation (including their ramifications in global culture and politics), the book became more and more a *retrospect* on the 1980s ... My readings of the radical eighties ... are thus embedded in an engagement with a putatively "normalized" postapartheid culture, and came to be a contestatory argument precisely *against* any normalization of the present that would foreclose "radical democracy", my shorthand for the spirit of eighties culture and a term whose scope is developed chapter by chapter in the book through the different and distinctive meanings each of the writes gives it The book is thus the record of one reader's engagement with the literary South Africa that emerged for cultural critics steeped in the antiapartheid movement of the North (1-2).

Written between 1992 and 1998, O'Brien's text retrospectively looks back to the radical eighties as the high-point of antiapartheid struggle. We do not learn if the author was actually in South Africa during the eighties. The process of negotiated settlement further intensifies the sense of retrospection and 'the book became more and more a retrospect on the 1980s'. However, since the focus was already in the first place retrospective the 'waning of militant hope' appears to have provoked an intensification of retrospection, moving from the celebratory to the valedictory. Mourning the 'spirit of eighties culture' combines the commemorative with a sense of belatedness as the revolution deferred becomes all too clearly the revolution defeated. Hence the intransigent '*against*'. But this is not a defeatist melancholia:

To return to periodization: the periods before and after the transitional years 1990-1994 seemed to come together around a question that was prominent in South African cultural critique well before the final phase of apartheid and persists well after the watershed election of 1994, namely, how to construct an expressive culture that springs from, and responds to, and shapes visions of economic and political democracy deeper than ballot box democracy, parliamentary representation, liberal capitalism, cultural pluralism, and the Enlightenment discourse of rights Here my assumption is that we have much to learn from the South African case about the general debates that rage today over social explanation and the interpretation of culture, especially in African and postcolonial studies (2-3).

The South African settlement, the stalemated revolution, is simultaneously seen as an exemplary moment and the vindication of progressive democratic struggle: 'The South African case is wonderfully instructive, in a time when the great oppositional political movements and the acuity of the theory they gave rise to seem to have failed to bring in lasting radical change ...' (8). This is not least because of the 'relative strength of Marxism' in 'the South African cultural economy' (7). Although O'Brien concedes 'I am conscious that the left in the North is tempted to project onto places like South Africa its own failed hopes', the process of "'globalization from below'" (8) is taken to mean that deep structural connections can be made between the various components of the global cultural economy.

O'Brien's oscillation between a sense of failure and the euphoria of victory usefully captures the contradictions and torsion prevalent in debates concerning South Africa. Flickering between loss and vindication, resentment and inspiration, *Against Normalization* levels out history into a fatalistic moral fable concerning the

opportunism of erstwhile revolutionaries and the mendacity of fellow-travellers. The complexities of history are smoothed over; for example, the use of violence by the liberation movement at Quatro and the sometimes lethal achievement of hegemony at the expense of radical Trotskyite grouplets in the Western Cape. The violence of the struggle was not unidirectional or containable, which is one of the reasons that the historic compromise was embraced, it seemed to me, with exhausted relief rather than total satisfaction.

O'Brien defines the normalisation that he opposes as the shift from the redistributive RDP (Reconstruction and Development Plan) to the market-oriented GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution):

To return to the concept of normalization: there is normalization of ends and normalization of beginnings. The sort of making normal that ended the abnormalities of apartheid no one could possibly be against. It is the normalization – or the norming – of *beginnings* that is pernicious, the circumscription in advance of just where a search for deep democracy could lead in politics, in economics, and in culture (7).

Is it possible to disengage these two processes of normalisation so neatly? The death-throws of the apartheid system did not simply unleash a vista of opportunity, rather it could be argued that the demise of apartheid intensified levels of crime and social trauma as the containment of the townships crumbled. These consequences hardly presented an environment conducive to deepening participatory civil society, and the ANC has openly articulated its achievement as one of stabilisation rather than immediate social justice. However one feels about the frustration, if not betrayal, of struggle hopes the limited choices presented by political and economic realities must be taken into account.

O'Brien notes that the phrase 'radical democracy', borrowed from Laclau and Mouffe, is used 'in the spirit of nineteenth-century term "social democracy" or the notion of economic democracy (neither ever yet attained by even the most advanced capitalist formations' (7). South Africa, so exemplary in its struggle credentials, fits routinely into the normalising global pattern of inequity. But is the alternative destiny so fervently endorsed by O'Brien really any more radical than current conditions? Are 'economic democracy', 'social democracy', 'deep democracy', posited as incompatible with reformed property relations within the envelope of neo-liberal capitalism? These slogans are in fact frequently mouthed by South African politicians on both the right and the left, in fact by anyone touting the free-market system as the antidote to apartheid. Doesn't the claim to be 'radical' –

within the context of capitalist democracy - require more than a commitment to democratic reformism within the economic shell of the old regime?¹

Endorsing the wry observation that it takes anti-colonial struggles to produce neocolonial conditions, O'Brien argues that normalisation must be consistently interrogated '(most importantly "from below" by radical trade unionists and intellectuals)' (4). But if academics are to be included in the category 'intellectuals', in what sense can they be said to be working from below? Since universities here are dependent on State patronage it is only necessary to jerk the purse strings and threaten the jobs of academics to stifle criticism. At a time when 'it should no longer be possible to pursue oppositional intellectual work without taking into account the institutional conditions of the production of that work' (8), O'Brien overestimates the radical potential of academe.

In his visits to South Africa - 'I have been making research trips to many South African universities' (8) - he appears to have taken in only two historically black campuses. This might explain the mistaken, if gracious, attribution of radical credentials to his avowedly liberal white hosts. This mirrors the somewhat predictable attribution of a radical (i.e. socialist) tendency to the black masses, despite the obvious and eager embrace of capitalist consumerism by this potentially revolutionary agency. *Against Normalization* raises provocative and timely questions about how South Africa is misread, and how local academics collude in the construction of flattering portraits of their own activities. Today, when it is safer to lament the corruption of the ruling party than question the macro-economic policy (GEAR) which leaves apartheid-garnered wealth undisturbed, O'Brien's argument usefully recalls both the energy and the terrain of struggle.

¹ In what sense is the following institutional perspective a radical departure? On the occasion of a symposium at the University of Natal, June 24, 1998, on "Academic Labor and Neo-Liberal Transformation of the University, South Africa/USA", the 'radical solution' embracing meaningful redistribution in South Africa lapses into the tight-fisted: 'Anthony O'Brien: OK, but it strikes me that we fight this battle [of redress] all the time: do we level up or level down? You don't want to get into a 'race to the bottom', taking from UND to give to the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) or to the technikons or the teacher-training colleges, but rather: level up' (<http://www.workplace-gsc.com/workplace2/undsymp.html>).