Posel, Deborah. - *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961 : Conflict and Compromise*

Monsieur Saul Dubow

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In the decade following the 1976 Soweto uprisings, a number of South African scholars were prompted to reflect in new ways on the origins and development of segregation/apartheid. The ideological baggage they carried was heavy: on the one hand, the remnants of 1960s liberal modernisation theory continued to cast a shadow on scholarly discussions; on the other, the overweening theoretical claims of structuralist marxism were still academically fashionable. For writers like Posel, the false dichotomy of the so-called “liberal-radical” debate has ossified, by the mid-1980s, into a sterile stand-off. One of the problems bedevilling both liberal and radical approaches was the tendency to conceive of apartheid as a monolithic entity driven by a unitary strategy. In order to get beyond this restrictive vision, it was necessary to disaggregate the component elements of segregation/apartheid and to pay proper attention to the fissures and complexities which underlay its composite creation.

This valuable monograph works at two levels. In analytical and theoretical terms, it challenges the view that the apartheid state and apartheid ideology can be conceptualised in simple instrumentalist terms, either as an inflexible agent of Afrikaner nationalism, or as the direct expression of capitalist interests. Moreover, it indicates that apartheid was neither inimical to the interests of capitalist development, nor necessarily the only or even the most effective means of sustaining capitalist accumulation. Substantively, it offers the most comprehensive and rigorous discussion of South African urban labour policy between the 1940s and 1960s that we yet have. On this account alone, it represents an indispensable contribution to modern South African history.

Posel begins with an effective attack on the myth of an ideological “grand design”. Building on the work of John Lazar (whose unpublished doctoral thesis was completed at much the same time as the one that forms the basis of this study) Posel demonstrates that apartheid was not invented or implemented according to a single blueprint. Underneath the appearance of ideological consistency was a series of pragmatic compromises designed to appeal to different constituencies with varying interests: capitalist, agriculture, mining, secondary industry as well as various levels of the state bureaucracy. H.F. Verweerd, who for many writers personifies the cold, unyielding logic of the apartheid project, is revealed as rather less than the omnipotent social architect of popular and journalistic memory. The idea of a single masterplan, Posel argues, neglects significant conflicts within the seeming edifice of apartheid and it conceals important deviations and ad hoc modifications in its application. In particular, the 1947 Sauer report (which is often held up as a key statement of apartheid policy in the urban areas) is shown by Posel to embody competing conceptions of apartheid with all their attendant contradictions and ambiguities.

With regard to urban policy, Posel shows persuasively that there was a significant divergence between the theory and practice of influx control. The emergence of a differentiated urban labour force (divided along the lines of “insiders” and “outsiders”, settled urban workers and migrants) was an unintended consequence of state policy rather than a matter of deliberate design. Instead of being precisely tailored to the competing needs of different employers, the
segmented urban labour market was significantly shaped by the strategies, needs and life-situations of workers themselves.

Posel applies her unrivalled understanding of the contortions of urban policy to highlight different phases in the emergence of apartheid. When the Nationalist government came to power in 1948 it was transfixed by the problems of African urbanisation, but deeply divided about how to proceed. For some ideologues or "visionaries", true apartheid could only be realised through total economic segregation. By contrast, more pragmatic elements within the state (exemplified by the Native Affairs Department) argued that this ideal was impractical and sought instead to utilise influx policies both to allocate African labour amongst competing employers and to secure broad political control over the urban African population. Posel identifies the late 1950s as the moment when apartheid moved into a discrete, second phase, characterised by the linked processes of homeland development, forced population removals, industrial decentralisation and ethnic division. This heightened programme of social engineering was registered in the realm of urban policy through intensified administrative efforts to reduce the urban African population. The tacit acceptance of a permanent (though limited) urban African population was contested as the very notion of African citizenship within white South Africa came under attack. Ultimately, this maximalist policy proved unsuccessful, but it was only in the post-1976 era that the state came to recognise the impossibility of this aim. Indeed, as late as 1982, the Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Bill envisaged the removal of Africans' residual statutory rights to remain permanently in the cities.

The strength of this book lies in its analytical sophistication, the precision of its argumentation, and its mastery of the most intricate details of urban apartheid administration. If there is a corresponding cost to this approach, it is that the dissection of urban apartheid legislation in all its detail does not make for easy reading. Moreover, in dismissing the notion of an aberrant grand design, there is a risk that Posel represents apartheid as rather more coolly logical than it actually was. By comparison with its forerunner, segregation, the era of high apartheid retains an exceptional quality that defies explanation in terms of rational calculation and complex self-interest.

The writer and critic J. M. Coetzee goes too far when he insists that apartheid was a form of collective madness, but it is equally necessary not to lose sight of the irrational dimension of apartheid ideology: the obsession with racial purity and the hysterical fears of racial pollution and defilement. There was both madness in the method of apartheid, as well as method in its madness. Where better is this illustrated than in the ethos and style of the Orwellian bureaucracy responsible for the administration of influx control?

Saul Dubow