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## Review of L' Afrique du Sud

Compte rendu de lecture

**John Western**

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- 1 This admirable handbook does and does not do what it sets out to do. What it does do well and reliably, without raising its voice, is to provide excellent up-to-date information on contemporary South Africa. What it does not do - or should I say, falls short of doing - is, as would seem to be promised by the back cover blurb of this contributor to the "Idées Reçues" series, to interrogate a number of possibly misleading conventional wisdoms, such as "Nelson Mandela est un héros." ( So one expects some revisionist depreciation of him? - But no, he's a hero, it is decided.) Or, "L'Afrique du Sud est la première puissance économique d'Afrique." (So the reader anticipates being told that in some ways it is not? - But no, it is, this book decides.) Or, when discussing the oft-heard assertion "The Zulus are a warrior race," we learn of the *Mfecane* which during the 19th century laid waste large areas of the east of the country. Did this mean the white colonisers were coming across empty lands for the taking ? The author's use here of inverted commas around the verb "justifier" implies his reservations on this score, but then he says (p. 43) "Ce n'est pas le lieu d'entrer dans cette discussion."
- 2 Thus, although the reader might anticipate controversy and confrontation, it becomes clear that such is not really the intent of this author. I think he's basically asking "So, do you want to know about South Africa? Let me tell you." At this very moment - I write this in early July 2010 - South Africa has, to use a current American colloquialism, been appearing on many more people's radar screens. An unfamiliar land which to international languages such as English and French had given just two words until now - *apartheid* and *trek* - has now given us a third : *vuvuzela*. Were I an inquisitive, first-time, francophone visitor to South Africa for the World Cup, I would do well to have this handy book, so full of good value, in my back pocket.
- 3 Some specific likes : the use of boxes on particular topics, permitting the author to temporarily digress more richly, is often very successful. Those on Johannesburg's multilingualism (p. 31-32) and the Zulu role in the 1990-1994 urban warfare (p. 45-46) are superbly informative. Similarly with the up-to-date information on AIDS/SIDA. The

author does not let the terrible irony elude him, that the dismantling of apartheid's greatest unfreedom, the Pass Laws, permitted entry to an even more dread scourge. The information on pages 24-25 on water resources is important, because overall, South Africa does not possess them in abundance. The section on religion, especially pages 91-92 which do not overlook the continuing relevance of sorcery, is fine. So is the consideration of violent crime. Here I must admit that this section negates my strictures in the first paragraph of this review. That is, we start with a widespread received opinion, that "L'Afrique du Sud est un pays violent." Gervais-Lambony then addresses this claim. Is it true? Well, yes. But then, despite the unavoidable limitations of space, he really does dig into it : it's not only murder and carjackings, it's rape and domestic abuse. He introduces many factors to help us understand something which does not simply spring from human wickedness. He crisply concludes "Tout ceci ne justifie rien mais explique beaucoup" (p. 94).

- 4 We get some meaty basic information in the book's first 1½-page box (p. 11-12). South Africa exports mainly to the developed countries, and only 15% of its exports go to Africa; whereas only 3.9% of South Africa's imports come from Africa. So does this imbalance, signifying an intermediary role for South Africa, in any way imply a comprador-like, exploitative role for South Africa vis-a-vis its neighbors? On the other hand, on page 112, the author asks, do we with South Africa deal with a globalised economy only marginally linked to the African continent ? Pursuing this point, he informs us that the great, reputedly South African company the Anglo-American Corporation is now quoted not on the Johannesburg but on the London stock exchange; and that South African Breweries in 2002 acquired the American brewery Miller, becoming thereby an American conglomerate now named SAB Miller.
- 5 From economy, to culture and politics : Gervais-Lambony sees the codification of erstwhile plastic African ethnic identities into "tribes" to be the result of colonial-era missionary activity: the imperative was to translate the Bible into local tongues. The ethno-linguistic mold thereby became set ... and we are forced to encounter the law of unintended consequences. Differentiated "tribes" become a useful tool whereby colonialist and settler may divide-and-rule. And again, migrant workers to the city only discover their ethnic identity among strangers once they have gone to the multilingual milieus of mine or urban area. ( Somewhat similar to the USA situation a century ago, whereby nationality came to immigrants with their exposure to the polyglot American industrial milieu : an observer noted "... they became Americans before they were ever Italians".) Apartheid's divide-and-rule by race and ethnicity is now over, but "difference" continues to have horrendous consequences, particularly in the context of African non-citizen residents of South Africa. To formalize the identity of citizen inevitably means creating those who are not members ; whence violent xenophobia. The disturbing facts are given in the box on pages 85-86.
- 6 For a non-French reviewer (I am an American raised in England who has lived in South Africa) there are some intimations of the author's particularly *French* sensibility. American and South African multiculturalism seem to convey a sense of oddness, perhaps with the potential for fissiparism, to Gervais-Lambony, a partaker in a culture seeking after republican unity. Also, I sense somewhat of a kind of wonderment, as he, who is one nurtured (I assume) in *la France laïque*, eyes the religiosity of South African life and politics.

- 7 Finally, I find few errors in this book. Perhaps the biggest, even though rather indirect, is the attribution of the Pass Law to the apartheid project. Reading pages 47-48 strongly implies that it was those 1950 laws there cited which established the system. It was not. They go back to the 19th century, and certainly to the Bantu (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1946 - before apartheid came to power. In a box on page 52 the interlocking Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 is mentioned, but how it interlocks with the Pass Law is not at all made clear. If this handbook is for the beginner on South Africa, then they will have missed the implications of this, and be quite lost. A second remonstrance regards the downplaying of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), which certainly at the time of the Sharpeville anti-pass Law unrest (1960) and during the lifetime of Robben Island prisoner Robert Sobukwe appeared to be an important liberation movement - though the 1994 democracy elections were to reveal its feet of clay. Third and last, the sole factual error I found was on page 39, and it was simply the misspelling of the Afrikaans place-name where gold was first found in what was to become Johannesburg : Langlaagte.
- 8 In sum, compared to where this country stood a quarter-century ago, we have a transformation. All kinds of good things have happened: just read the figures given on page 76 about provision of running water, of electricity, of housing. On the other hand, the inherited social and spatial structures don't seem to have changed that much. And - a widespread lament - corruption seems endemic to the ANC government. Like me, Gervais-Lambony wonders whether the glass is half empty or half full. And on his last page 124, he says to the reader, look, here's the positive view and here's the negative. Take your choice.
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