

# Review

Glenn Moss (2014) *The New Radicals: a generational memoir of the 1970s*. Auckland Park, Johannesburg: Jacana

Grahame Hayes

grahame.hayes@gmail.com

It is often said that history, or rather history writing, is only kind to the victors. The ANC are regularly criticised for omitting the unsavoury aspects of the liberation struggle against apartheid from the public record. Furthermore, it is also contended that other opponents of apartheid in the history of opposition are not accorded their legitimate place in the struggle for non-racialism, democracy, and social equality. For instance, these would include the PAC, Black Consciousness, the Unity Movement, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko, amongst others. The ‘victors’ do themselves and society in general a disservice by writing unidirectional and teleological accounts of the history of the struggle against racist oppression and exploitation, as they then set themselves up as the messiahs of the new society, leaving little room for democratic participation and contestation.

Clearly the governing party wants to assert its hegemony over many aspects of the society, and an important feature of this is to ‘control’ how the past is seen and made sense of. This involves at least two closely interrelated aspects, one being the correcting of the lies and distortions of the apartheid past, and the second being the projecting of a different and egalitarian future. As Glenn Moss himself writes in his final chapter, ‘Political history has no natural beginning or end. Neither do the stories and memories which give texture and depth to interpretation. There are no real conclusions to what is a never-ending narrative, a process in which the past, present and future influence, and in turn are influenced by, each other’ (247). The critical question of course is *how* the ideas of the ruling party become the ‘ruling ideas’, and hopefully through rigorous debate, popular

participation, and critical reflection on practice, both successful and failed, and not through the imposition of a majoritarian will to power.

Against this background Glenn Moss's *The New Radicals* is a particularly welcome contribution to the political history of the 1970s. Outside of the important focus of Soweto June 1976, this decade has been somewhat neglected in the story of the resistance to apartheid, and racial capitalism in South Africa. And this is the story that Glenn wants to tell by focusing on his pivotal involvement in radical student politics during the 1970s, in Johannesburg, and at Wits University. With the exception of the final chapter (chapter 11: Bookends), where Moss very briefly brings his story 'up to date' by concluding in 1996 with a meeting with Nelson Mandela and the other Nusas trialists, the other ten chapters stick faithfully to the decade of the 1970s. It might seem odd, and even a criticism, that a text on an aspect of South Africa's recent political history should stick so resolutely to a specific decade! But, then again, this is not a political history in any strict sense, and is accurately subtitled *a generational memoir of the 1970s*. Moss undoubtedly has the political and intellectual credentials to write an authoritative political history of the 1970s, and beyond, and yet has written a well-crafted and informative memoir. As with all good biography writing *The New Radicals* reveals the complex intersection of the personal and the socio-political. It shows a young white man in apartheid South Africa coming of age, and making political decisions against the grain of his white privilege, and having his identity and political consciousness formed by the socio-political goings-on, on the 'margins' of white mainstream South African society.

However, Moss's focus is not an autobiographical one, as he uses his personal history of radicalisation as a vantage point to recover the importance of the decade of the 1970s in the wider history of resistance and struggle in South Africa, and at the same time to highlight what for him were crucial developments and influences during this time. One of the first influences that Glenn discusses is Black Consciousness, and opens his book with a wonderful anecdote of his first encounter with Steve Biko in April 1970 at a student seminar at the Redacres Mission, near Howick in Natal. At this seminar the debate revolved around the difference between the liberal notion of multi-racialism, and the more radical challenge put forward by Saso of non-racialism, and the need for separate organisational forms (Saso and Nusas) to achieve this. Moss continually calls forth the challenge of BC as a radicalising impetus in Nusas. The mere existence of a radical black student

organisation separate from Nusas functioned as a persistent reminder for Nusas to deepen its understanding of the experiences of black people under apartheid. Nusas did take on board many of the challenges and criticism levelled at it from Saso, and also took issues further by starting to develop critiques of the underlying economic foundations of apartheid.

Thus the second major influence on Nusas, and Moss himself, was the Marxism that was taking hold amongst left intellectuals, and especially within the universities. It was a Marxism critical of the dogma of Soviet Marxism, and more aligned with a philosophical and humanist critique of the ravages of class society, in short Western Marxism of the new left. One of the most important critical Marxist thinkers at this time in South Africa was the political philosopher Rick Turner. (See the review of Billy Keniston's [2013] *Choosing to be Free: the life story of Rick Turner*, by Eddie Webster, in this issue of *Transformation*.) As Glenn makes clear throughout his memoir, Marxism gave radical students in Nusas the intellectual tools to analyse the structural roots of exploitation, and to critique the complicity of so-called liberal capital with apartheid. It made nonsense of the liberal capitalist claim that undeterred market forces would ultimately undermine the racist operations of apartheid. Marxism stressed the economic foundations of exploitation and racial oppression, and argued for the centrality of (working) class consciousness as one of the pre-conditions for the overthrow of capitalist social relations. Many of the radical students in Nusas immersed themselves in the heady debates and theoretical complexities of Marxism that were happening in Nusas seminars, in independent reading and study groups, and even in some university courses. However, one of the practical political effects of new left Marxism was making links with workers' everyday struggles and lives. Marxism was responsible for shifting the focus from anti-apartheid to anti-capitalist struggles for many radical students. The influence of Turner was crucial in connecting student activism with a concern for the plight of the black working class.

This led many students to work for the nascent trade union structures of the early 1970s, for instance, the Industrial Aid Society (IAS), and the various (worker) general benefit societies. The campus-based Nusas Wages Commissions were an adjunct to these trade union and worker activities, while at the same time doing research on workers' living and working conditions, fighting for better conditions for university workers, and printing and distributing workers' newspapers. Together with the theoretical insights of Marxism, these practical engagements with workers and workers' issues,

were profoundly radicalising for the students involved in the struggles of labour under (racial) capitalism. Besides a commitment to fight for workers' rights, Marxism and the activities of the Wages Commissions were instrumental in fomenting students' anti-capitalist commitment, and the imaginings of a radically different social order from that of apartheid – social democratic, socialist, and for some, even communist.

Glenn Moss gives a detailed account of many of the intricacies and complexities of the worker organisation work that he was involved in, especially in the IAS. And while this work was very important in shaping the political consciousness of student activists during the early 1970s, it was not the only contributor to student radicalism. Moss discusses the profound mobilising effect that deaths in detention, the detention of students, and the torture of detainees had against the actions of the apartheid state. Student reactions to these actions of the state and its security forces were often in the form of massive protest marches regardless of whether permission had been granted to march off campus, as well as some brazen physical clashes with the police 'monitoring' these marches. While important as acts of defiance these public displays did not really present a challenge to the apartheid state. It was in this context that the Nusas 'history of opposition' campaign, spearheaded at Wits, and under the leadership of Glenn Moss, was such a success in mobilising large numbers of students behind Nusas, as well as a challenge to the white public, and the apartheid state to think about who the 'real' leaders of the black majority were. The 'Release all political prisoners' campaign of 1974 concretised the history of opposition to apartheid by making students, and white society, aware, in many instances for the first time, of who the people were that were serving long jail sentences on Robben Island and at Pretoria Central Prison.

The mid-1960s to the mid-1970s was a period of relative quiescence for the liberation movements, and their organisational presence was weak within the country. What the 'Release all political prisoners' campaign did was give the leaders of the liberation movements and their organisations a 'presence' again in the country. For student activists it connected them with a long tradition of resistance and struggle against racial oppression and exploitation that had been 'missing' through the massively repressive decade from mid-1960. However, one of the most fascinating threads that Moss weaves throughout his book is that because there wasn't a radical tradition *readily* available on the white campuses at the start of the 1970s it had to be 'created'. And it was created locally, internally, autochthonously. According to Moss,

The ingredients for its creation were: Saso's split from Nusas; the Black Consciousness critique of white liberals; the advent and local uptake of Western Marxism; the involvement in worker struggles, and the formation of the Wages Commissions; the politics of detention and torture; and the 'absence' of the organisations of the liberation movements.

This home-grown radicalism certainly baffled the security police who were used to tracking down imported, external conspiracies of communist infiltrators and agitators. Interrogation in detention often sought to find the names of these 'external agents', and it took the security police a long while to realise that the 'enemy' was within! For different reasons, the liberation movements in exile, the ANC and SACP in particular, were also somewhat suspicious of these local, independent developments, even though they clearly aligned themselves with the Congress tradition. The tension between comrades in exile and locally based activists still has currency within alliance politics.

Glenn Moss's text is an important recovery of memory against forgetting, and yet he does not tell us what to remember, or worse preach to us about why it is 'good for us' not to forget our past. As he says, his book 'charts a slice of political history' (vii) based mostly on his memory, and that of some other participants, of his political involvement during the decade of the 1970s. If all this book does, and I hope it does more, is to complicate the story of young white student activism of the 1970s it will have achieved a lot. *The New Radicals* also gives us a sense of what the 1970s decade was like in so-called white society, and the courage that it took for young white students to go against the 'normality' of apartheid segregation, and privilege. What is noteworthy is that many of the participants of the 1970s student radicalism are still going against the 'normality' of the current system of privilege and inequality.