WITNESS (Pietermaritzburg)
22 Oct 2014, p.8

Spotlighting the new radicals' role

THE NEW RADICALS: A GENERATIONAL MEMOIR OF THE 1970S
GLEN MOSS
JACANA

BOOK REVIEWER: NALINI NAIDOO

PLENTY of the liberation history written so far has focused on the African National Congress's (ANC) role in the struggle — the sixties and earlier; the exile years and post-1990. There has been a sense the seventies were uneventful.

Glenn Moss shows this was far from the case and that in universities across the country, the seventies were a time of revolt, renewal and intense intellectual debate.

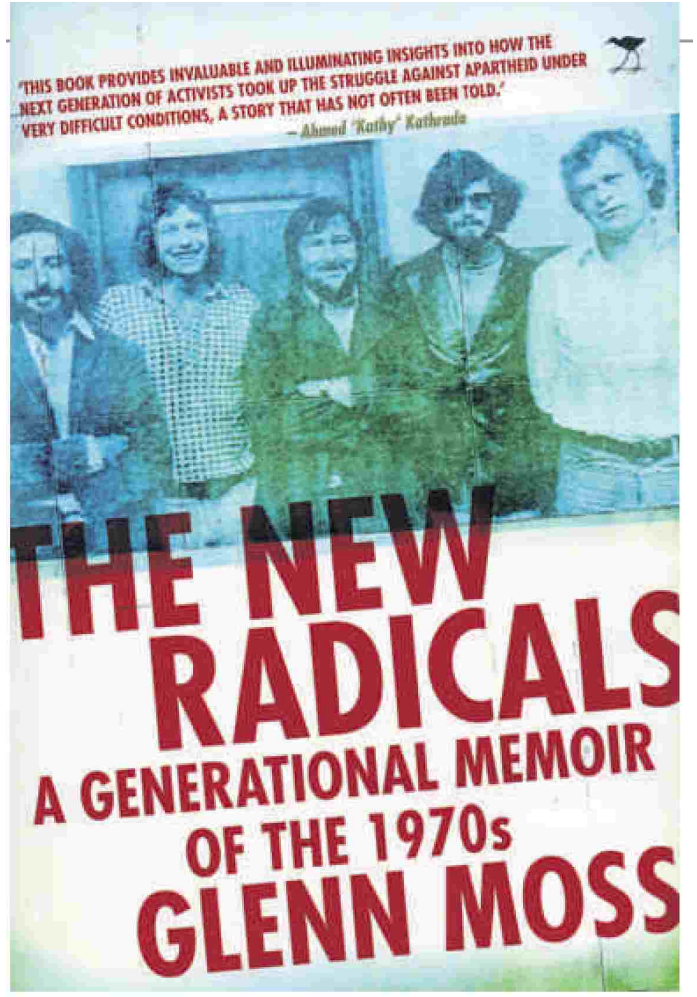
His book fills a valuable gap in unpacking details of an extraordinary time. Moss came from an apolitical family, but, along with a group of fellow white students, came to question intensely the injustices around him. It was a position he acknowledges was deeply influenced by Steve Biko, who challenged white students to think about their privileged positions and what they could do to bring about meaningful change in South Africa.

This gave rise to the new radicals, as the book is so aptly titled, who looked at capitalism and its role in propping up apartheid. This analysis gave rise to a host of innovative programmes. There was the focus on the plight of political prisoners as well as the invaluable work of the wage commissions that did much to highlight the working conditions of black South Africans. Some of these students were instrumental in setting up and working with the fledgling trade union movement that later emerged as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu).

Moss describes the circumstances under which they operated under the intense security police scrutiny. This led to detentions and a lengthy trial of the National Union of South African Students (Nusas) leadership. An intriguing aspect of the book crying out for more coverage is the phenomenon of students as police spies. There were personalities like Craig Williamson who, as an employee of the International University of Exchange Fund (IUEF) in Geneva, connected with the upper echelons of the ANC in exile.

Moss and many of the "new radicals", have gone on to make substantial contributions to South African society. This is an important book highlighting the fact the liberation struggle was not one dimensional.

It was rich and varied, and a time of great intellectualism. Perhaps what the country needs now is another generation of radicals — and this does not mean populist leaders like Julius Malema.



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