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Glenn Moss, *The New Radicals: A Generational Memoir of the 1970s*, Jacana, Johannesburg, 2014

Reviewed by: Benjamin Fogel

The New Radicals is a generational memoir, or rather a political memoir of a generation of white South African student radicals that came of age in the early 1970s through the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). This generation formed a key part of the emerging movements that awakened South Africa from the political slumber of the 1960s. As Glenn Moss puts it, his book “records how they (a group of students) moved from the relatively liberal protest and symbolic politics of an elite university to help in creating the preconditions for a radical challenge to the society that had formed them” (p.vii).

Moss was a leading student activist at the University of the Witwatersrand, later in the trade union movement and one of the founders of such important labour-oriented left publications as *Work in Progress* and *The South African Review*. The book is largely based on his own memory and that of his comrades. Rather than being an exhaustive work of archival research, it is an account from the perspective of an active participant in the events described.

The strength and influence of white student radicalism should neither be burdened with the hubris of nostalgia on the part of ageing radicals or the misleading scorn of those who would seek to portray “white radicalism” as parochial or just another incarnation of liberalism. This book forms part of an emerging literature of the struggle against apartheid that breaks with the hegemonic messianic narrative in which the African National Congress (ANC), and through the figure of Nelson Mandela, in particular liberated the country and redeemed the country from the sins of its past. This rapidly expanding literature includes books such as Beverley Naidoo’s *Death of an Idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett* (Jacana 2012), Billy Keniston’s biography of Rick Turner *Choosing to Be Free* (Jacana, 2014) and Saleem Badat’s history of the black student movement, *Black Man, You are on Your Own* (Real African Books, 2010).

Much of the attraction of these books is that they portray the real hope that many South African activists and intellectuals had for a different vision of a liberation to that of the increasingly polarised South Africa of 2014, a South Africa that would have been able to break with the economic structure of colonialism and apartheid, one based on an egalitarian ethic, rather than a surrender to market-driven values, a South Africa where the Marikana Massacre would have been unthinkable. The strength of these political memoirs is that they are told through the perspective of those engaged in the political struggle, through the optimism of that particular moment rather than the cynicism that can be brought upon by hindsight.

This generation of radicals turned away from the traditional multiracial liberalism of NUSAS and the Progressive Federal Party, in part as a reaction to the emergence of the Black Consciousness

Movement. Black Consciousness emerged through the South African Students' Organisations (SASO), which had famously broken with NUSAS during a national conference in Grahamstown in 1968 after Rhodes University refused to allow black NUSAS students to eat and stay in the same facilities as white NUSAS members.

Black Consciousness's rejection of the liberal multiracialist politics within NUSAS, and its harsh critique of white liberalism, forced activists such as Glenn Moss and his comrades in NUSAS to re-evaluate the politics of NUSAS and to attempt to steer it in a more radical direction. The critique of apartheid that they developed moved away from both the official liberal and Communist position, which held that apartheid held back the development of capitalism in South Africa. Instead it held that apartheid and racism were an integral part of the development of capitalism in South Africa. Moss himself entered the world of student politics through his own rebellion against the masculinist student culture that had taken hold in Wits University's student residences.

This period saw the emergence of a new generation of South Africa Marxists theorists based in the United Kingdom, mostly sociologists and historians who attempted to theorise the connection between capitalism and apartheid, in particular Martin Legassick and Harold Wolpe. Other figures, such as Rick Turner, Dan O'Meara, Rob Pieterse, Mike Morris and Duncan Innis, make regular appearances in the book. As Steven Friedman notes, while academic Marxists managed to eventually take over the social sciences in South Africa, many others attempted to turn their Marxist theory into a new praxis within the emerging black trade union movement.

Marcuse, Lukacs, Gramsci, Cabral, Althusser and Sartre were read along with the canonical texts of classical Marxism. The intellectual fertility of this period is well captured, along with the methods used to pass on banned texts from photocopying to sneaking in Marxism in postgraduate courses in Development Studies. This period saw a Marxism emerge that broke with the dogmatic Soviet Marxism of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and moved well beyond the limits of sectarian Trotskyism to produce an ambitious and rich literature. In academic terms its particular strengths lay in labour sociology, social history and attempts to re-theorise the nature of the apartheid and economy.

Figures such as the labour journalist and commentator Steven Friedman, the sociologist Eddie Webster, Steve Biko, the poet Breyten Breytenbach and activist Jeannette Curtis constitute the cast of characters that make up the book. The action is set in student digs, student residences, conferences in the bush, police stations and a prison. The police infiltration of NUSAS is also recorded, in particular the role of the odious Craig Williamson. Moss notes that many within NUSAS viewed Williamson as a spy. Williamson went on to have Jeannette Curtis murdered through a letter bomb.

The manner in which NUSAS mobilised and was radicalised through actions directed against apartheid repression is another major feature of the book. Moss and 27 other student leaders were imprisoned for months by the apartheid state in what became known as the NUSAS trial, which eventually saw the acquittal of all 27 students. Many of those who were charged would later be put under a banning order that saw them placed under house arrest and prevented from participating in political activity, or even meeting with more than one person at a time.

The book's other major strength is its ability to locate the debates surrounding the black trade union movement in the political context of the time, as radical students inspired by the likes of the

charismatic philosopher Rick Turner began to form “wage commissions” set up to investigate the working conditions and wages of black workers. Many of these students took part in the occupation of the Anglo-American offices following the massacre of 11 striking workers at the Western Deep Mine on 11 September 1972; the massacre served as a political awakening to a generation of South African students about the link between apartheid and capitalism.

Many of the initial disputes about the direction of the black trade union movement are recorded in the book, minor disputes morphed into political sectarianism and eventually the famous “workerist” versus “populist” debate, around the question of how trade unions should relate to the ANC and the struggle against apartheid. These debates are now being rediscovered in the markedly different political context of the emerging split between South Africa’s largest trade union, the National Union of the Mineworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), and the ANC.

The major shortcoming of the book, however, is its abrupt ending. The book ends in 1976, in the midst of the political action of the time. Its scope does not cover the late 1970s and 1980s and the birth of a vibrant alternative publishing industry in South Africa, both legal and underground, the emergence of the United Democratic Front (UDF), the growth of South African Marxism in universities and the birth of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). However, this can be forgiven. Moss has produced an enthralling and important book, which captures well the ideas and practices developed during this period that would later become a key part of the mass struggle against apartheid.