Escaping the trap of Apartaans·

Book review
Louw-Potgieter, J (1988) **Afrikaner Dissidents: A social psychological study of identity and dissent**. Clevedon, & Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters - 1 85359 011 8.

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"How, or by means of which process(es), does a person, as a member of a specific group, in a specific social, economic and historical context, start to question the political status quo" - that is the task that Louw-Potgieter set herself in her PhD thesis (the basis of the book under review). The study presented in book form is of "white, politically left wing Afrikaans speakers", excluding both "coloured" and ultra-right wing Afrikaans speakers (Louw-Potgieter, 1988, p2).

During the same week that I started reading her book **Vrye   Weekblad** reflected two opposing trends in Afrikanerdom. The front page spoke of "spirit of protest" on Afrikaans-language campuses, while the now infamous face of Barend Strydom invited the reader to examine his origins on the inside pages. As I complete this review a debate takes place on SABC-TV between two ex-dominees, now both MPs (one from the NP and the other from the CP) on the claims by CP leader Andries Treurnicht that there is biblical justification for a Derde Vryheidstryd (a third war of liberation, the previous two struggles having been against British

imperialism, this one against fellow Afrikaners).

"Afrikaners", the "white tribe", have always had a fascination for foreign observers - as has been the case with "the Zulus". Usually the focus has been on the cohesive elements of this "tribalism" on the lager, on the group boundaries, on "white" in a continent of "black". In part it was, and still is, because that is the easiest way to write about Africa (whether from Europe or the USA, or from within the ranks of our internal "foreigners"/other, the English-speakers and the commercial press); in part because that was the way in which "Afrikaners" defined themselves. The Soviet fascination with Afrikaners surely has to be sought in their own concern with "nation" and "nationality" - with apparently little success in creating the class solidarity that would roll back the vertical identifications of ethnicity. The British fascination no doubt stems from its own imperial past and humiliating clashes with both Boere and Zulus.

Louw-Potgieter (1988) argues that "any investigation dealing with dissent should shift towards the dissident as group member" and that "a cognitive-motivational theory of social identity (SIT), developed by Henry Tajfel... will be used as a framework" (p4). Because of her sample (both the social composition and the method of selection - a "grapevine approach"), she is analysing the "actions, words and thoughts" of "a high status group" ("well-educated, middle-class professionals", with an acknowledged male and academic bias in the sample). Respondents were asked to complete autobiographies, which were then followed up by interviews. While respondents confirmed the main assumption of Louw-Potgieter's study, namely that "becoming a dissident is a continuous process" (1988, p27), the roots were to be found "in a growing awareness of inconsistencies between two (or more) values, inconsistencies between theoretical and expressed societal values, and inconsistencies regarding the recipients (ingroup/outgroup) of these expressed values" (1988, pp35-6). She found the respondents to be "active agents" in change (1988, p46).

In the foreword to her book Louw-Potgieter reminds the reader that "the content of identity might change over time" and her data reflect social identities during the period 1982-85. There is, however, a certain timelessness to her presentation due to the absence of a wider and historical context. Her study, with its valuable focus on individual responses to ethnic group definition, remains on the boundaries that she describes, the boundaries that feature so ambivalently in the **individual** autobiographies.

In an article (1987), also based on her research, she had written that within "a specific kind of social psychology of political dissent" causal explanations "are located firmly within the 'deviant' individual", while "societal variables" (such as "the content and meaning of political norms"; "the ways in which these norms are created and maintained") are rarely questioned or criticised. She gives the example of Marion Sparg, but could as easily have referred to "explanations" of the actions and identities of Breyten Breytenbach, Hein Grosskopf, and many others. **Afrikaner Dissidents**, however, also remains too isolated from that societal context within which these social identities are a matter of intense struggle.

Possibly Louw-Potgieter was able to neglect her own warning because the people she studied were drawn from that very individualistic stratum of the petty bourgeoisie, the intellectuals. As one of her respondents commented: "... Afrikaners were a very 'heterogeneous group' of 'individuals' with strong opinions ..." (1988, p101). Their dissidence was in part "a reaction against group belonging" (1988, p103), of people who "'had come to conclusions on their own'" (1988, p104) said others.

Directly contrasting her left respondents' absence of strong alternative group formation with the actions of ultra-right wing Afrikaans-speakers, who are discussed in chapter 7, and the latter's present fragmented (gang-like) but strong and frequently militaristic group formation, might have indicated a clear class distinction. Rural and urban poverty, unemployment, and racially-defined economic insecurity among an increasing number of white Afrikaans-speakers contrasts very strongly with the educated, employed and relatively secure **individuals** Louw-Potgieter presents in this book.

The value dilemma that her respondents found themselves in is far removed from the threat to material interests that reform away from apartheid has meant to Afrikaner working class members and uneconomical drought-stricken farmers. In other words, can a study of social identity be adequate without reference to "the vital concrete elements through which the struggle between classes is fought out: organisation and ideology"? (O'Meara, 1983, p3; and see Moodie, 1980, p 299, on "ideology" as "the prescriptive articulations" which transform "civil faith and social metaphysics into directives or a program for political action").

Louw-Potgieter writes of a "residual social identity" that remains with most of her respondents (in both intergroup and intragroup situations). This appears to be possible because of the separation by them of the political mobilisation frequently associated with ethnic group formation from the cultural - politics from religion, language, and even history (Louw-Potgieter notes a "salient awareness and/or good knowledge of their group's past" from the respondents (1988, pp18-19), confirming the centrality of an invented, revived or reconstructed past in ethnic mobilisation).

For the materially threatened elements within Afrikanerdom the separation of cultural and political mobilisation appears not to be situationally "possible" - political direction to ethnic mobilisation is demanded and offered, as is the case with Inkatha and its offerings of Zulu politicised ethnicity. If the political direction dominant within the group appears to be "selling-out" an identity can change dramatically - as is occurring with the stress, noted by Louw- Potgieter (1988, p125) on a "Boer" identity as distinct from "Afrikaner". As Moodie (1980) noted: "I do not assume that all citizens accept equally a given civil faith... It may appeal differently to different social classes: in fact, certain classes in a society may entirely reject the reigning civil faith" (p296).

The "lists of characteristics" of what an Afrikaner is (Louw- Potgieter, 1988, p50) allows dissidents to associate with some aspects while rejecting others (such as the political dimension referred to above). Under certain circumstances respondents felt either more or less of an Afrikaner - dissidence does not mean, for the majority, a rejection of all things associated with being an Afrikaner (1988, pp78- 81). It is probably in this "undoing" of certain facets of ethnic identity from the strict and prescribed dominant group formation that there lies a possible solution to the ethnic fragmentation that apartheid has created or strengthened.

This micro-study of social identity, despite its confinement to a small social segment, offers useful insights into responses to ideological struggle and group formation and how to study them. However, for this reviewer, studies of social identity and mobilisation demands interaction between social historians and sociologists in their studies of "invented traditions" and ideological mobilisation and struggle, on the one hand, and social psychologists on the other (see Ronald Fraser (1984) for one such attempt, albeit highly personalised!).

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