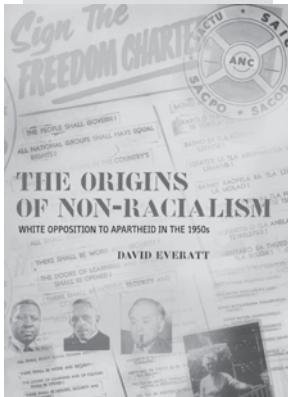


## REVIEW

Michael Cardo recently completed a biography of Peter Brown, the national chairman of the Liberal Party between 1958 and 1964.



**The Origins of Non-Racialism: White Opposition to Apartheid in the 1950s: ISBN: 9781868423576**

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# The Origins of Non-Racialism: White Opposition to Apartheid in the 1950s

By David Everatt, Wits University Press: 2009, pp. 273

Non-racialism has fallen on hard times in South Africa.

Racial reconciliation and “rainbow nation”-building, the dominant themes of Nelson Mandela’s presidency, gave way to a narrow, self-regarding, racially hypersensitive strain of Africanism under Thabo Mbeki.

Jacob Zuma seems eager enough to don Mandela’s mantle. At his presidential inauguration, Zuma praised Mandela and promised “not [to] deviate from [his] nation-building task”. But Zuma has done little to turn that commitment into a working reality.

Nor has he been quick enough to distance himself from the racially divisive statements of some of his key backers, like ANC Youth League President Julius Malema, whose tirade against the appointment of “minorities” to key positions in the country’s economic ministries went against the non-racialist grain.

Although David Everatt’s book is not about contemporary South Africa, his richly detailed analysis of non-racialism in the 1950s – “the decade that forged the ANC in its current form” – provides a clear historical context for present-day debates on race.

Everatt argues that non-racialism has “no common pro-active moral content in post-apartheid South Africa”. “No-one”, he claims, “including the ANC-led government seems to know what a ‘normal’ post-apartheid state looks like, or how we will know when we reach it”.

This is incongruous. How can it be that fifty years after non-racialism was first popularised in South African political discourse – Everatt regards the Freedom Charter as the founding document of non-racialism – the ruling party still does not have a clear idea of what non-racialism means in reality, for the state and citizens alike?

For Everatt, the answer is twofold.

Firstly, he doubts whether a nationalist organisation can be non-racialist. He writes that non-racialism was “crafted by the African nationalist resistance movement in response to apartheid...but it remains questionable whether the same African National Congress is able to throw off the constraints and racial blinkers of nationalism and truly embrace non-racialism”.

In fact, African nationalism and non-racialism are incompatible. The former is about racial control – so-called “equality under African leadership” which really boils down to racial bean-counting – while the latter is about freedom from “demography as destiny” and the importance of individual qualities, talents and values over skin colour.

Secondly, the ANC's failure to crystallise an agenda around non-racialism has historical roots. Non-racialism was an ideologically loaded and contested issue in the 1950s.

Although its stated goal was a non-racial society – a South Africa that “belongs to all who live in it, black and white”, as the Freedom Charter proclaimed – the ANC itself was not even organised along non-racial lines.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, hardline African nationalists in the ANC and its Youth League insisted that members of different race groups should mobilise in separate “national” congresses. They worked together through the Congress Alliance. From an organisational point of view, this was “multi-racialism” as distinguished from non-racialism.

Indeed, white supporters of the ANC, who gathered in the Congress of Democrats (COD) (formed in 1953), were only allowed to join the ANC in the late 1960s, and could not sit on the ANC's national executive committee until 1985.

The multi-racial composition of the Congress Alliance was a highly politicised issue. The extreme left – the trade unionists, the Trotskyists and those Marxists who rejected the (banned) South African Communist Party – denounced the racial compartmentalisation of the Congress Alliance. They argued that the struggle for racial equality obscured the “real” struggle, which had to be fought on class (not racial) lines and whose aim should be substantive equality for all. Otherwise, a non-racial post-apartheid society would merely replicate material inequalities.

On the other hand, many Africanists (and white Liberals) viewed the multiracial make-up of the Congress Alliance, which gave the COD seats on its co-ordinating structures, as a ploy by white communists to lead the ANC by the nose. Such sentiments eventually led to the breakaway formation of the Pan-African Congress in 1959.

It was difficult for the ANC to articulate a clear message about non-racialism in such a charged environment. According to Everatt, the disputes which tracked the development of the ANC in the 1950s were “fought about the form that racial co-operation should take, and the place of whites in the struggle against apartheid”. He remarks, in summing

up: “The failure to resolve the issue adequately then lives with us all in South Africa today”.

The book would have benefited from a concluding chapter that makes this argument clearer. But its real value lies in the rich vein of primary archival material and oral interviews which Everatt taps in bringing to life white opposition to apartheid in the 1950s.

In particular, there are two fascinating chapters on the Liberal Party (LP), formed in 1953 and forced to disband in 1968 when the Prohibition of Political Interference Act made it illegal for blacks and whites to belong to the same political organisation.

Everatt skilfully documents the LP's transition from a conservative party constrained by the classical liberalism of the nineteenth century Cape liberal tradition to a radical liberal organisation. By the 1960s, the LP's commitment to nurturing non-racialism increasingly came to be shaped by a keen appreciation that the state must take an active role in redressing socio-economic inequalities.

Of course, the real challenge to 1950s-style liberal non-racialism came not during, but after, that decade, with the rise of the black consciousness movement in the 1970s.

Its founder, Steve Biko, believed that white liberals assuaged their guilt by expressing solidarity with blacks while continuing to extract at will from “the exclusive pool of white privileges”. Their insistence on colour-blind integration as the only route to non-racialism, he claimed, blunted black consciousness and would stunt real change.

Biko was a non-racialist but he believed that racelessness was a chimera.

Biko raises several challenges for liberals. How do you plan for a non-racial future by forgetting a racially divisive past? How do you make sense of a history of racial injustice, and attempt to repair it, by pretending that race is insignificant? How do you measure progress towards a non-racial society without using race as a marker, given that it was used as a marker of disadvantage in the past?

These are the sorts of questions with which we will have to grapple if a commitment to non-racialism is to be restored to public life.