

NP's failure to secure minority rights, especially language rights and control over schools during the negotiation process.

In section 4 (chapters 15 and 16) the author focuses on the declining position of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction at school level and in the tertiary sector. Giliomee is critical in particular of the strategy that former Afrikaans-medium universities took, taking the University of Stellenbosch to task for its failure to re-establish itself according to the new political and demographic reality of a post-apartheid South Africa. This, Giliomee argues, was done in a way that favoured the hegemonic position of English in education even further, and was to the detriment and eventual downfall of Afrikaans at these institutions.

The book ends rather bluntly after chapter 16 and lacks a summary of the salient points and arguments made in the various chapters. Furthermore, there is indeed, as claimed, some repetition of certain themes. However,

this is a useful reflection on the Afrikaners' ascent to political ruling power and the eventual transition of this power to the ANC via a negotiation process. The book is a handy reference for researchers on South African contemporary politics and history and on the Afrikaners *pe se* and is recommended to readers searching for a pocket-version analysis of Afrikaners' control over the South African state and their decline from power.

*Privileged precariat: White workers and South Africa's long transition to majority rule*

**D van Zyl-Hermann**

**(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 359 pp. ISBN: 9781108924702)**

Simon Bekker  
*Stellenbosch University*  
sb3@sun.ac.za

If we examine South African society today through the institutional lens of NGOs, one group that emerges as highly visible and influential is that of liberal and libertarian organisations. There are for example a number

of Christian organisations, the Islamic Gift of the Givers, the Free Market Foundation, the Institute of Race Relations, the Helen Suzman Foundation, the Centre for Development and Enterprise, and, of course, a number of mass media platforms and journalists (certainly not all).

They are liberal and libertarian in the sense that there is justification for supporting them for the assistance they offer to the economy, in the spheres of education and health, and in the community at large. Furthermore, such help is offered to those in need rather than to specific racial, ethnic or religious groups of individuals. In addition, though not always totally non-state, these organisations are located in civil society and are not biased towards any particular political party.

And then we have, also increasingly visible and influential, the Solidariteit Trade Union, its and its affiliated Afriforum, Helpende Hand, Helpmekaar and Boufonds. Court cases presented by Gerrie Nel include appeals against the South African state's huge cash bestowment to Cuba, a privately funded tertiary Training College, presentations on farm murders on the rightwing Fox News that led to exaggerated claims of white farm murders by the former president, Donald Trump, and now a Kaapse Forum in die WesKaap.

These organisations are also located in civil society and also support those in need. They see themselves as providing assistance to disadvantaged minorities in South Africa, such as Afrikaners and Afrikaans-speakers in particular. Should we place them with the others mentioned above, in the liberal fold?

Danelle van Zyl-Hermann's *Privileged precariat: White workers and South Africa's long transition to majority rule* traces the history of these organisations, beginning in the 1920s and ending in 2019.

In his 2006 publication on the Afrikaans language debate (*taaldebat*) in South Africa, Chris Brink identifies one of the narrative's curious features, namely that "the debate about Afrikaans has been conducted almost exclusively in Afrikaans".<sup>3</sup>

The same can be said about important strands in the narratives uncovered by van Zyl-Hermann, particularly after the establishment of Solidarity ("a service-providing social movement expressing state-like ambitions") in 2002. The official publications of Solidarity and its associated institutions as well

---

<sup>3</sup> C Brink, *No lesser place: The taaldebat at Stellenbosch* (Stellenbosch, SUN Press, 2006).

as the proceedings of a seminar on Solidariteitkunde, a compulsory seminar which introduced newly-appointed staff members to the movement – were conducted largely in Afrikaans. The book accordingly reveals much of what has remained largely unknown to many South Africans regarding the emergence and resilience of a post-apartheid social movement not associated with any political party nor with the majority of the national population.

However, the title of the book does not include the term 'Afrikaner'. Rather than using the common-wisdom historical lens of i) a racially segregated mineral-rich colony during the first half of the twentieth century, followed ii) by an Afrikaner nationalist government promoting independence, apartheid and separate development during the second half of the twentieth century, and iii) culminating in the democratic transfer of power to the African majority under Nelson Mandela towards the end of the century, the author introduces as her alternative historical lens, the country's "long transition to majority rule". By this she maintains that the demands of white capital in South Africa in the 1970s – as reflected in the state commission (the Wiehahn Commission) investigating state control over labour – led to the national white government prioritising economic growth over the protection of white labour. On this ground-breaking commission she writes:

On Labour Day 1979, the first part of the Wiehahn Commission's report was tabled in Parliament. In what has been labelled a historical concession, the Commission recommended the principle of 'freedom of association' thereby extending trade union rights to Africans, and the recognition of African and multiracial unions. This proposal envisioned, for the first time in the country's history, an integrated system of labour relations which included Africans as 'employees'....

The report did acknowledge that, due to the 'multidimensional characteristics' of South Africa's labour force, the interests of some workers in some contexts might need safeguarding. It recommended a number of protective measures through which this could be achieved, including the principle of consultation between employers and employees before implementing changes in established practices; recourse to an Industrial Court for any aggrieved party; the requirement that industrial councils must reach consensus concerning proposed changes; and the strict enforcement of the principle of 'equal pay for equal work' (p. 142).

The result, as witnessed in the history of the Mine Workers Union (MWU), was the erosion of white workers' rights and privileges because an African workers movement gained traction. Rather than dying a "dinosaur's" death, however, membership of the MWU increased markedly from the 1970s to

2002 due to recruitment beyond the worker category of mining employees. The Solidarity Movement, established in 2002, incorporated both old and new members of the MWU. It insisted moreover on further recruitment within what became known as its *nismark* (niche market) which was widely interpreted to mean 'Afrikaner' and 'white', notwithstanding post-apartheid legislation prohibiting recruitment on a racial basis. The long transition accordingly began well before the South African political 'miracle' of 1994 and continues to this day.

Thus, the focus of Van Zyl-Herman's research is on the fate of the white working class, protected by early white governments of the twentieth century – from after the 1922 Rand Revolt until the 1970s, and thereafter left to a precarious future because neoliberal policies and interests came to dominate late apartheid era. In search of a new patron, this class of white workers opted to unite with a new emergent institution in civil society (rather than with organised labour). However, this unity was (and remains) fragile. The main discourse of Solidarity after 2002 – one of both claiming legitimate representation of Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa and of acting as a key extra-parliamentary opponent to the ruling ANC – did not temper two disruptive consequences of this amalgamation of middle-class and elite Afrikaners with former MWU Afrikaner workers. In the first place, at leadership as well as managerial levels, these working-class members were widely perceived as inferior in class terms. Simultaneously, the working-class members themselves remained anxious about their precarious work positions and ambivalent about their racial identity in today's South Africa. They also expressed anger about domination by their Afrikaner superiors. In the words of one of the author's respondents:

You know, we whites are like this – sorry, actually saying 'we whites' is wrong, we Afrikaans whites, because you won't see an Englishman doing this. Give a guy a little bit of status, and he becomes such a big-head that he has to turn sideways to fit through a door. That's one of our boere problems, I don't know why (p. 287).

Accordingly, although these disruptive consequences have not led to a split in the ranks of the Solidarity Movement, it is apparent that class remains one of the salient identities dividing members of the movement into different camps.

Another striking argument underpinning the work as a whole is that of uncovering the role of globalisation in South Africa's long transition, The 1970s, particularly in developed nations, saw a reconfiguration of the power

balance between state, capital and labour. Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK are well-known examples, leading to an important loss of power and influence for organised labour. With regard to the white working class, the Wiehahn Commission's recommendations fit well into this reconfiguration.

As a result, after the 2008 financial crisis, the reality of precarity, particularly of labour, emerged globally. The international debates today regarding populism, inequality, elite dominance, identity politics and a general shift to the political right resonate with many of the issues mobilised by the Solidarity Movement.

Simultaneously, as the author underlines, these processes have their "own local inflections in South Africa". The Solidarity Movement reveals that it is not necessary to engage in formal party politics nor to claim to represent a national majority ("the real people" according to the populists) to qualify as an important civil society actor in a nation-state. In short, the emergence after 1994 of an institution representing a historically powerful minority – the Afrikaners – with the ability to mobilise capital, has seen the formation of an important and distinct social movement in the Global South.

At the height of apartheid in the 1960s, a book entitled *A very strange society: A journey to the heart of South Africa* was published and widely read.<sup>4</sup> South Africa's modern history and political economy have commonly been labelled as exceptional, as not fitting convincingly into any of the modern nation-state ideal types of analysis. This status of exceptionalism has endured. Danelle van Zyl-Hermann fits South Africa historically into the recent swings that globalising forces have brought to bear on the political economies of numerous nation-states. South African exceptionalism is removed by the author's historical lens.

The first part of the book focuses on the emergence of a white working class in apartheid South Africa up to 1970. This is the context within which the national government's decision to abandon its "sweetheart" deal with this white labour ally is discussed. Thereafter, the shift from trade union to social movement is first analysed during the late apartheid phase when many members supported right-wing white Afrikaner political parties and subsequently during the early democratic phase of South Africa when their loyalties shifted from trade union – the Mine Workers Union – to social

---

4 A Drury, *A very strange society: A journey to the heart of South Africa* (New York, Pocket Books, 1968).

movement – Solidarity. This is the period that the author labels the “long transition to majority rule”.

The second part of the book unpacks the policies and strategies of the Solidarity Movement and its allied institutions. This discussion leads to the unearthing of tensions and ambiguities that arise from the mix of class interests present among members of this Afrikaner social movement. These tensions are identified both among Solidarity leaders and, in a separate chapter, among former MWU members. The concluding chapter informs the reader of the most recent developments within the Solidarity Movement (up to 2019).

From predominantly white working-class membership of the Mine Workers Union under apartheid to working class membership of the Afrikaners’ Solidarity Movement in post-apartheid civil society, white worker identity reveals complexity, ambiguity and continuing precarity. The author’s narrative of a forty-year transition for this group of South Africans from class and race to identity and culture, is convincing. Today, for these white Afrikaner workers, neither race nor class vanishes and culture remains as one of the collective identities that they share with Solidarity membership, membership which they cherish for security and for privilege.