Between the Acts

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WILLIAM FINNEGAN
Crossing the Line: A year in the land of apartheid
418pp. Hamish Hamilton. £14.95.
0 241 123399

JOHN CARR
An Act of Immorality
304pp. Hodder and Stoughton. £14.95.
0 340 399562

MARK MATHABANE
Kaffir Boy: Growing out of apartheid
345pp. Bodley Head/Pan. £12.95 (paperback, £3.50).
0 370 310586

Sympathetic commentators sometimes claim that the Afrikaner people of South Africa are motivated not by race but by culture. The Afrikaners' first concern, so the argument goes, is not to favour whites by oppressing blacks, but to preserve the Afrikaans language, religion, and fragile cultural identity in the face of extreme hostility both within and without South Africa.

This cultural theory of Afrikanerdom harks back to the Boer War, and to international liberal sympathy for the Boers' fight against gold-greedy British imperialism. Today, nearly a century later, it helps the contemporary liberal mind to make some kind of sense of the South African régime. At least behind the horrors of apartheid there lies a recognizable human motive. However, the theory is given the lie by the Afrikaners' attitudes to the "Cape Coloureds". These are the three million people of mixed ancestry who live mostly in the Cape Province. Prominent exiles include the poet and activist Dennis Brutus, the pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand), and the cricketer Basil D'Oliveira. Racially, the Coloureds are fairly heterogeneous, containing varying contributions from white settlers, Negro and Malay slaves, and indigenous Hottentots. But culturally they are unified, since like the descendants of black slaves in North America, they have acquired the language and religion of their white masters. Ninety per cent of the Coloureds have Afrikaans as their mother tongue. And their largest religious denomination is the Dutch Reformed Church, the Church of the white Afrikaners.

As far as cultural identity goes, the Cape Coloureds are simply brown Afrikaners. But, far from enrolling the Coloureds as cultural allies, the Afrikaners have persistently rejected them. The Afrikaner National Party was elected to power in 1948 on a platform of racial purity for its poor white power base. Among its first laws were the Population Registration Act, which defined the difference between "White" and "Coloured", and the Group Areas Act, which decreed that the two groups should live separately. And throughout the early 1950s the Nationalists fought a long constitutional battle to remove qualified Coloured voters from the general electoral roll.

The laws of South Africa do not mix well with the laws of genetics. Since many Coloureds are quite white, and many Whites have a fair share of black genes, children often turn out differently from their parents. (I can remember the press coverage of one notorious case from my own schooldays. Sandra Laing, an eleven-year-old White, was sent home from school and reclassified as Coloured because of her looks. After a long legal fight her white parents managed to get her reclassified as White again. Eventually, she applied to be reclassified yet again, as African, so that she could marry the man she was living with.) Only a few South Africans, though, get directly caught up in the absurdities of racial reclassification. But under the Group Areas Act race determines where you can live, and this has affected the whole Cape Coloured community. Cape Town used to be a cosmopolitan city. Centred on the harbour below Table Mountain, and winding around the neck of a peninsula dividing the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, it housed Whites alongside Coloureds, Malays, Chinese and visiting sailors. Even today there are still a few small areas where the colours merge and the casual visitor is likely to feel lost, racially speaking. But over the past thirty years the Group Areas Act has steadily drawn lines around the places where whites want to live, and removed the Coloureds to a safe distance.

The greatest wound to the Coloured community has been the destruction of District Six. Down by the docks, and next to the city centre, District Six was a place of bars, carnivals and artists. Seventy thousand Coloureds lived in District Six, some for up to seven generations, and it embodied the history of the Coloured community, who, after all, did not exist as a people before Cape Town did. But today District Six no longer exists. The Group Areas Act has uprooted the people, and put them down ten miles away in the badlands of the Cape Flats, bulldozers have knocked down the balconied terraces, and created a pile of rubble in the middle of the city. One of the saddest details in William Finnegan's *Crossing the Line* describes how such rehoused Coloured families would occasionally revisit their old neighbourhoods, now razed or resettled, in memory of their lost lives. Finnegan is a young American who spent a year as a teacher in a Coloured secondary school in the Cape Flats. He has written a fine book melding his personal experiences with the recent history of South Africa.

Oom Flip du Toit on the stoep of his farm workshop; one of more than sixty photographs in Lifetimes: Under Apartheid *by Nadine Gordimer and David Goldblatt (115pp. Cape. £15. 0 224 028707)*

Perhaps the best among the many good things in the book is Finnegan's account of his developing relationship with his Coloured colleagues and pupils at Grassy Park High School. His first impressions were of a normal high school in a deprived urban area. The pupils were interested in pop stars and the teachers in salaries. Politics seemed not to be on the agenda, and Finnegan thought he could play a role in raising consciousness. But in time he learned that in South Africa silence does not mean ignorance.

> I heard a commotion start outside. I went to the door and saw students beginning to dash back and forth between the buildings. I could hear classes chanting, "Fifty-seven! Fifty-seven! Fifty-seven!" Then kids were suddenly writing "57" on the walls with chalk. Pieterse (another teacher) hurried past, looking flushed and breathless. I asked what the hell was happening. "Fifty-seven!" he shouted, not stopping. "Mugabe has won fifty-seven seats! ZANU-PF is going to rule Zimbabwe!"

On another occasion Finnegan was trying to get a class of thirteen-year-olds to discuss a speech by Zenani Mandela, daughter of Nelson Mandela.

> I asked if they knew who Nelson Mandela was. The children all avoided my gaze; no one answered. I asked Hester (the class monitor). She stood and said, very quietly, "Yes, sir. They know."

Three months into the school year the political alignments became clearer. Non-white children throughout South Africa declared a school boycott in protest at discriminatory education. ("We don't want no education, we don't want no thought control", they sang, taking the Pink Floyd into the hit parade and on to the banned list.) Many of the older children and the younger staff members at Grassy Park turned out to be sophisticated political organizers. Finnegan corrected his earlier impressions. But he still had things to learn. When the riot police were coming he told his class to stay in their room. A colleague explained the inappropriateness of this strategy: "I cannot tell these children just to sit quietly and wait for the riot police to come in and attack them . . . . I'm sorry, but I don't think you understand *how much the Boers hate these children*."

The Afrikaner attitude to Coloureds was perhaps most clearly displayed in the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950, which outlawed sex between Whites and Coloureds (sex between Whites and Africans had been illegal since 1927). Various instrumental justifications were sometimes offered for this law, such as that it would protect young Coloured women from White men. But the name of the Act gives the game away. To the Afrikaners inter-racial sex is morally defiling. In more than a dozen cases white men charged under the Immorality Act have chosen to kill themselves rather than live with the stain. The implication, of course, and one which has understandably rankled with the Coloured community, is that the very existence of the Coloureds is a shameful reminder of past sins.

John Carr's *An Act of Immorality* relates an autobiographical episode from the Cape Town of the 1960s. Carr, an Englishman then in his early forties, was working as a copywriter in a small advertising agency. He met a young Coloured woman called Cynthia at a party. They fell in love, had a daughter, and in due course moved to England. Carr and Cynthia seem fairly unremarkable people. But for the two and half years covered by the book they lived a quite extraordinary life. They never went outside together. They never let anybody see them entering each others' houses. When the baby was born Carr only saw it when Cynthia's brother-in-law smuggled it to him in a bag of groceries. A lot of Carr's time was understandably spent hanging around in bars. He describes a milieu of hard-drinking British drifters and ex-servicemen. (The bars in South Africa are men-only as well as White-only.) It is striking that it is these lumpenexpatriates, rather than his more respectable South African friends, who stand firm when Carr needs help in leaving the country.

The world of the Cape Coloureds has been blighted by apartheid. But by South African standards they are relatively well off. Mark Mathabane grew up in Alexandra, one of the "townships", like Soweto, where the African labourers needed in Johannesburg are allowed to live. In *Kaffir Boy* he tells how his childhood bed was made of cardboard, and his first memories were of police raids. His family scrounged in rubbish dumps for food. His father spent long periods in prison for the crime of being in Alexandra while unemployed. Hard as it is to imagine, people like Mark Mathabane's parents *want* to live in Alexandra. In South Africa there are people even worse off than the "township" residents. At the bottom of the pile are the inhabitants of the so-called "homelands". Mathabane describes a visit he made with his father to relatives in the Venda tribal reserve: "The place was mountainous, rugged and bone-dry, like a wasteland . . . . Everywhere I went nothing grew except near lavatories . . . . Malnutrition was rampant, especially among the children." The constant fear of most township residents is that they will be sent away to these semi-deserts.

At the age of eighteen Mathabane managed to get out of South Africa by a curious route. As a child he was bullied by his mother into going to school (after she had queued for days to get the requisite birth certificate). He proved to be a quick learner. As a result he was introduced to the English liberals who employed his grandmother as a gardener. Among the cast-offs they bequeathed him was a tennis racquet. He turned out to be as good at tennis as he was at schoolwork, and made more white friends, including the American tennis player Stan Smith, who suggested he apply for tennis scholarships to American colleges. *Kaffir Boy* ends with Mathabane's departure to enrol for the fall semester in 1978 at Limestone College, Gaffney, South Carolina.

Mathabane's details do not always inspire confidence. (Steven Biko was battered by the Police in Port Elizabeth, not Durban; he was then moved to Pretoria, not Johannesburg.) But he does make clear the limited choices facing young blacks in South Africa today. One option is political activity, with the attendant risk of detention or being forced underground. A number of Mathabane's contemporaries took this path after the township riots of 1976. Alternatively you can keep your head down and hope for a steady job. With luck and qualifications you might even end up as a white-collar supervisor with a half-way respectable salary.

The "total strategy" of the present South African government is to encourage the steady workers while crushing political resistance. By making concessions it hopes to create a stable black bourgeoisie with a stake in the present system. This has led to some genuine changes. The right of African workers to own property and live permanently in urban areas has been expanded. The Immorality Act was finally repealed in 1985 as an unnecessary embarrassment. But the strategy seems unlikely to succeed. Perhaps the first wave of skilled black workers will be grateful for a few crumbs from the white table. But in the longer term the creation of a black middle class is only likely to fuel dissatisfaction with the little the Afrikaners are prepared to concede.

In the Afrikaner mind there is one greater dishonour than a black neighbour or sexual partner. The ultimate degradation is taking orders from a black person. The reforms of the past few years have shown that the Afrikaner leadership is not entirely inflexible. And there are certainly some genuine, if politically marginal, liberals among the more internationally minded Afrikaners. But even in its most *verligte* moments the National Party has never countenanced blacks being placed in positions of power over whites. The whole South African structure of employment, and the whole apparatus of separate bantustans and chambers of parliament, is carefully designed to ensure that no black is ever directly superior to any white.

The recent history of Zimbabwe, where most of the whites are English-speaking, provides an illuminating contrast. When they held power, the English Rhodesians ran as discriminatory a system as South Africa. And of course they did not hand over power willingly. But now they have been forced to cede control, most have grudgingly accommodated to their new masters. To the white Rhodesians the acceptance of black rule has been a matter of minimizing economic losses, not the overthrow of a moral order.

The English-speaking white minority in South Africa would no doubt similarly be prepared to settle if the costs of preserving apartheid became too high. But the Afrikaners are unlikely to be swayed by any such utilitarian calculations. In the Boer War the Afrikaner commandos who kept on fighting till the end were called *bittereinders* (as opposed to the *hensoppers*, the "hands-uppers" who surrendered). A lot more Afrikaners are likely to be *bittereinders* in the fight against black rule. The partial preservation of their economic privileges would be little compensation for the destruction of their moral universe.

None of the young blacks who appear in either Finnegan's or Mathabane's books has any doubt about the intentions of the Afrikaners. Without exception they view talk of reform as a subterfuge designed to deflect dissent. They recognize that if there is to be real change, it will only come from armed resistance. And they have no illusions but that the fighting, when it does come, will be to a bitter end. The prospect is not a happy one. Nor is it made any better by Western governments who allow themselves to be persuaded that the Afrikaners are susceptible to rational pressure.

Papineau, David. "Between the Acts." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 4403, 21 Aug. 1987, p. 894. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, 1902-2014, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200172530/TLSH?u=tlsacc&sid=TLSH&xid=9775acf0. Accessed 23 Aug. 2020.