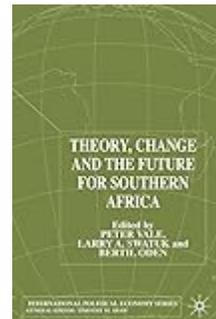




**Peter Vale, Larry Swatuk, Bertil Oden, eds.** *Theory, Change and Southern Africa's Future*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001. xi + 293 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-80276-2.



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## How useful is International Relations Theory for Understanding Southern Africa?

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This collection of essays surveys the chief strands of recent theoretical thinking by international relations scholars on Southern Africa's future. It is set apart by the fact that it is written by academics and researchers who are, with few exceptions, based in the region, as opposed to northern-based "experts," as the editors themselves emphasize. The volume is intended for students of sociology, political studies, international studies and international economics.

The editors hope to "bridge the existing gap between policymaking and recent international theory" (p. xv). Unfortunately, they do not succeed in their attempt to write an interdisciplinary text. Instead they have produced a text suited to an international relations (IR) crowd, full of IR jargon (and clumsy writing generally), insider references, and recycled interdisciplinary debates. Another major weakness of the book is that it does not have a coherent theoretical view. Books of this kind are bound to reflect differences and disagreements, but the editors fail here to place these debates within a

larger framework. Nevertheless, the book is not without interest.

The key questions for the editors are: How do we think about Southern Africa's future without being hung up by pre-made theoretical and policy paradigms? What is the role of the South African government in the region? Is "the state" the proper theoretical and analytical starting point? How useful are mainstream IR approaches, such as realism and neo-realism, in understanding the challenges for the region and its people? What is/ought to be the role of regional government bodies like the Southern African Development Community (SADC)? An overarching concern in all of this is how do academic debates emanating in the North work in analyzing politico-economic developments in the South? And what are the alternatives?

In the introduction, Peter Vale (a sometime ANC insider who until recently was director of the Center for Southern African Studies at the University of the Western Cape) and Larry Swatuk (University of Botswana and University of the Western Cape) express a deep pessimism as to the latter questions: "We share a deep dis-

satisfaction with the 'tools' we have been given for ordering what we see" (p. 2). However, by their own admission, what they have given us here does not constitute a new tool kit. (A third editor, the Swedish diplomat Bertil Oden, contributes an essay to the volume but does not co-author the introduction.) The editors have assembled a wide array of scholars with different viewpoints. One thing they largely agree on is that if IR is to make a positive contribution to understanding developments in Southern Africa, it will have to give up its over-reliance on "realism" and begin to look at processes both above and below state level. (An exception is a spirited defense of the realist approach by Johannesburg-based Hussein Solomon.)

Crudely, realism is a school of thought in IR that privileges the state as the primary actor in world politics. It has as its central proposition the idea of *realpolitik*: that since the purpose of statescraft is national survival in an anarchic environment, increased power is the proper, rational and inevitable object of foreign policy. Three essays stand out for the cogency of their criticism of this approach for Southern Africa, and for proposing intriguing, if incomplete, alternatives. In one such, Peter Vale makes the case that "the vast underbelly of Southern Africa, that vast interchange and exchange of people and ideas which is taking and has taken place" is as or more important than state action in determining the realities of the region (p. 23). He offers the examples of illegal migrant labour in South African border farming districts, the impact of South African liberation politics on neighboring states, and informal economic activity among African migrants and refugees in Johannesburg's inner city. Up to now, Vale notes, these trends have been reckoned with only as "threats to security," and not considered important to the larger political scene. However, Vale fails to tell us how to integrate these processes into IR analysis. He also fails to note that non-IR scholars have done excellent work on just these bases. Cape Town's Southern African Migrancy Project (which has research bases in much of the region) has done much to rework perceptions of immigration patterns to South Africa from the rest of the region. They conclude that cross-border migration in fact is much more two-way than traditionally supposed, and that more open borders might constitute an opportunity for regional development, rather than a problem for the South African state. Other excellent work along these lines has come out of a joint project by Harare's SAPES research center and the University of Helsinki Institute for Development Studies.[1]

A second useful essay is that of Balefi Tsie of the

University of Botswana. Tsie roots Southern Africa's problems in the context of neo-liberal globalization and changing state-market relations. He argues for closer scrutiny of the "multiple axes of exclusion inherent in the existing regional order, how these came about, what mechanisms sustain them and what possibilities exist for overcoming them in order to build an alternative regional order that is more humane and just."

Tsie suggests researchers ground IR "on the dominant relations of production which exist in the region, the forms of state and civil societies that they have given rise to and how the state and civil society in the region are being affected by the process of globalization". For him, "this means that IR...may well have to transcend both the 'neo-neo' synthesis and mechanical Marxism exhibited by such notions as core-periphery and be prepared to engage with other perspectives such as feminism and environmentalism" (p. 143). (As he points out, the essays in this volume by Lisa Thompson and Larry Swatuk attempt to do just that, with Thompson focusing on feminism and security studies and Swatuk on environmentalism.) Tsie argues that South Africa should exercise "benign hegemonic leadership" in the region to counter-balance the extra-statal pressures of the globalized, neo-liberal environment and that "a latent Polanyian 'second movement' generated by popular civil society across the region" constitutes the best hope for progressive development (p. 144). However, like Vale, he fails to draw on the growing scholarship on "popular civil society" (as distinct from the donor-dependent or state-patronage NGOs or CBOs) such as the Jubilee 2000 movement and its "scrap the debt" campaign, as well as popular struggles in the region for affordable water and access to electricity and HIV/AIDS treatment. Patrick Bond's latest book, *Against Globalization: South Africa Meets the World Bank, IMF and International Finance* (University of Cape Town Press) and the Municipal Structures Project which tracks privatization of municipal services in the region (a collaboration between researchers at the Public Management School of South Africa's Wits University and Canada's Queens University) are resources he might have engaged with fruitfully.[2]

Bertil Oden expands on the fraught but central question of whether the South African government and business community should become the 'benevolent hegemon' of the region. Oden argues in the affirmative, but not before engaging with at least five major arguments against such a view. One cites official South African reluctance to take up such a role. Another suggests that South Africa is as dependent on the vagaries of global

market forces as its poorer and smaller neighbours. The third is that South Africa lacks certain crucial institutional elements. Fourth is that the popular support in the country for South Africa's taking such a role is too tenuous. Finally, scholars have argued that other countries in the region lack the institutional capacity to participate in such a regime. Oden's responds that the relative and absolute strength of South Africa virtually ensures some kind of regional "leadership", all official protest notwithstanding. Further, while recognizing the pressures of globalization, Oden argues that significant space remains for state and regional agency. He is more willing to concede that popular support within South Africa, as well as capacity and willingness to participate on the part of other countries in the region, is not yet in place. However, he is reluctant to leave it at that. If we do, he argues, "The probable outcome is that a market driven, spontaneous regionalization will take place, in which concern for regional balances and sustainability is limited or nonexistent...The possible...alternative might not be benevolent regional hegemony but cooperative regionalization, along the lines of South African and SADC official regional policy." In the end, though, "such a strategy has to accommodate the dominance of South Africa and South African actors" (pp. 189-190). Once again, however, Oden suggests the paths we must take—in this case strengthening and reforming the SADC—without telling us how, or how IR can contribute to a new approach to these questions.

Other essays in the book include by Michael Nieman (spatial practices in and representations of the region), Bjorn Hettne (regional cooperation and development in Africa), Merle Holden (on the free trade debate), Andre Du Pisani (the SADC as a regional government) and Anthony Leysens (critical theory and Robert Cox).

In their introduction, Swatuk and Vale rightly take issue with the "practical problem solving" approach that characterizes the foreign-donor supported projects flowing into the region in the wake of South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. They point out that this foreign interest has not just left scholars "flattered" but also "led many down the garden path toward lending expert knowledge rather than toward critique" (p. 3). And many of the essays in this book do point to important points of entry for a critique of the dominant ways of looking at the region's problems and its future. But they fail in their stated aim of showing us how IR theory can be refashioned so as to give us the glue that will tie these various lines of critique together in a coherent analytical framework.

#### Notes

[1]. Southern African Migrancy Project—see [www.queensu.ca/samp](http://www.queensu.ca/samp). On SAMP's research, see also the 'Special Issue: Transnationalism, African Immigration and New Migrant Spaces in South Africa' of the *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol 34, No 1, 2000. On SAPES/University of Helsinki/Nordic Africa Institute: See the Proceedings of the the International Workshop on 'Interrogating New Political Culture in Southern Africa', Harare, Zimbabwe, June 13-15, 2001 (forthcoming in book form). See also: Abdoumalik Simone, 'Going South: African immigrants in Johannesburg', in *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies*, edited by Sarah Nuttal and Cheryl-Ann Michaels (Oxford University Press).

[2]. Municipal Structures Project: See their website at <http://qsilver.queensu.ca/~{}mspadmin/pages/index2.html>

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