DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150509/SJCH46.v1.9

ISSN 0258-2422 (Print)
ISSN 2415-0509 (Online)
Southern Journal for Contemporary History

2021 46(1):183-199

PUBLISHED:

23 July 2021

# "SOUTH AFRICA, MY HOME"

## BILL FREUND, FROM AGE 40-76 (1985-2020)[1]

I left America without a moment of regret or sorrow and have never had any desire to return. My dislike for the place never disappeared. Indeed, it reached a climax in 2016 when Americans actually elected the bigot Donald Trump as president, although in policy terms his opponent Hillary Clinton pleased me almost as little. The actual move to Johannesburg was made easier by the fact that, apart from books, I had accumulated so few possessions thus far. It really was the start of a new life.

In the end I stayed well under a year at the African Studies Institute (ASI) in Johannesburg. After several months, the geography lecturer Alan Mabin brought me together with two of his friends from Durban, geographer Jeff McCarthy and planner Mike Sutcliffe, both holders of doctorates from Ohio State University. Another Durban option had emerged and they succeeded in talking me into applying. And this time, the job, for a newly created professorship of economic history, was offered to me. I hesitated out of gratitude to Charles van Onselen, who was understandably annoyed at my leaving, but the idea of a permanent job, as South Africans refer to this kind of situation, and an end to those long years of uncertainty – and, after all, I now had turned forty – was too good to refuse…

---

[1] *The Southern Journal of Contemporary History* is privileged to feature an extract of Bill Freund's autobiography courtesy of Wits University Press, who gave us permission to reproduce the extract and Professor Patrick Bond, who assisted in making this possible. William Mark "Bill" Freund (6 July 1944 – 17 August 2020) was an American academic historian who was particularly known as an authority on Africa's economic and labour history with a particular focus on South Africa. He taught for much of his career at the University of Natal and its successor institution, the University of KwaZulu-Natal. A self-described "materialist", his most notable publication was *The Making of Contemporary Africa* (1984) which was widely praised as a survey of contemporary scholarship on the social and economic history of Africa in the colonial and post-colonial eras. He wrote widely on African labour and urban history subjects. We are saddened by his passing on, and may all his friends, family and colleagues find comfort in the beautiful work he left behind. For more, see WB Freund, *Bill Freund*: *An Historian's Passage to Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2021).

I should, however, comment on my days in Johannesburg where I met many people, some of whom have remained my friends over decades. Charles had a poor relationship with Eddie Webster, the leading light in Sociology, for reasons I can't really discern even now. Eddie has played a remarkable part in connecting his department to the renewed labour movement; indeed, its links continue to this day. Friendship with Eddie meant that I got called into service to 'monitor' the Vaal Rising of mid- 1984, a protest that began with resentment at the high service charges being imposed for the introduction of better amenities in a big township south of Johannesburg. This marked a new wave, bigger than ever, of resistance, quite violent and with its heart in the townships – 'the youth' – rather than the trade unions. I realised from this experience in particular that the reform impetus from the state was not going to work, whether it petered out or intensified, and that the South African political crisis had considerable space to run. The first State of Emergency was declared in 1985, but it struck me that reform was going to be retained, if not accelerated, and that further change, however it came, was certain. This reinforced my sense that my new life was not being built on too shaky a basis…

My time in Johannesburg was not long enough for me to really gauge the character of the University of the Witwatersrand in any depth. The rhetoric that was characteristic of the institution seemed familiar enough to me from my experience of the US, Britain and Britain's former colonies in Africa. However, as I gradually found out, South African higher education was fairly distinctive, quite apart from the notorious feature of racial segregation. By the mid-1980s there were universities that were supposed to cater for each of the four national 'races' as well as those located in the more substantial Bantustans.

The white English-speaking institutions saw themselves as the cream of the crop. In reality, they had had a distinctly colonial character in the earlier decades of their foundation. South Africa was a country with a population sizeable and rich enough to require a regular stream of engineers, doctors and lawyers who needed university institutions in order to qualify (and to obtain degrees recognised in the Anglosphere, above all in Britain). A very small number of individuals – liberals in the South African mould, a few of whom were radicalised – studied Africans and their ways. This was Bantu studies, later dubbed African studies. Thus Natal had a small African studies department which included several anthropologists. By contrast, sociology, with its more universal claims, was newer and less developed, growing out of social work. After the efforts of the brain trust assembled by General Smuts, including E.G. Malherbe, the future University of Natal vice-chancellor, and the establishment in 1940 of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, science received strong support in every sense from the government. This was essentially respected by the National Party when it came to power in 1948. You could not perhaps compare the science world in South Africa with that in the US or even Britain in wealth or prestige, but it did probably compare very decently with, say, Canada or Australia although it was always relatively smaller than was desirable.

By contrast, the social sciences and humanities were weak sisters. In the popular eye, there was little reason to study these subjects. The most talented or ambitious teachers tended to be foreigners passing through or were South Africans en route to overseas. My impression was that there was even a longer tradition in which serious intellectually minded individuals were expected to leave the pleasant world of the colonies for Oxbridge or London. Especially after 1960, for many it was no longer an acceptably pleasant world. In any case, the South African equivalent to what the British call the chattering classes or the French the BBs, bourgeois bohemians, largely nestled in or not too far away from the universities, was and still is very small.

At first, the humanities could at least hope to count on enrolling future teachers, but the popularity of school teaching diminished as time went on and it lost respectability compared with accountancy or actuarial science, the dreary university gold standard. Since student numbers were the basis for hiring staff, often the biggest humanities department was Classics, because the fusty medicine and law programmes demanded that students take a minimum of Latin. The dominance in real terms of the subjects that offered students direct access to jobs became more pronounced after the universities grew (not that they were very large) in the 1970s. In my faculty we had to deal mostly with students who did not really know what they wanted to study and were in fact very weak. The South African school system, very old-fashioned, led to matric exams for university entrance that were of a poor standard compared with British A-levels or good SAT scores in the US. As university education spread for people of colour, there developed an undercurrent of white feeling that you needed to get your children a degree so they would continue to be able to compete and, indeed, more than compete and, by the 1980s, emigrate to Britain, the US, Australia or Canada, where their inexpensive South African degrees were recognised…

The library was still quaintly located in the narrow upper floors of Memorial Tower Block while the present facility (which made a huge difference once completed) was under construction. The chief librarian was a Miss Van der Linde, daughter of a former mayor of Bloemfontein, who presided over a forbidden books section kept under lock and key. The wonderful home of Killie Campbell with its collection of books, artwork and other critical resources concerned especially with black life in this part of South Africa was a special property of UND, quite another story, but was still suffering from the leadership of Van der Linde's henchwoman. One committee I did sit on concerned the governance of Killie Campbell, and the struggle to get the lady in charge to do some work was a tedious and long one.

The university had separately managed humanities and social science faculties, and I chose to stay in humanities as my home faculty. To some extent this reflected my own background but it was also a reaction to the incestuous and, at best, merely superficially liberal nature of the little crowd of social science professors. Much of the humanities faculty was also tedious but the larger size meant that I felt more able to function in this setting. It was typical that Economics seceded from the social sciences and signed up with Commerce, purely because it was a richer faculty regardless of intellectual value or importance. What counted was student numbers – and Commerce was where one could find the mounting number of students who merely sought a well-paying job after graduation.

I held little interest in governance in this kind of institution and I suppose the academics would not have liked or trusted me. I was consigned to committees dealing with the likes of the Killie Campbell Library or the University Press, where I did feel some sense of engagement. The truth is that I quite liked the job of teaching. I enjoyed the classroom. I was happy to classify the students with grades as well as getting to know the more interesting ones, and I was not at all unconventional in my ideas about standards even if I was inclined to reward interesting but eccentric cases. I was perfectly happy to eliminate or fail students with miserable track records, to me an important task for universities. Moreover, I didn't like rewarding students because of their political proclivities per se.

The dominant culture of the university was liberal. I remember the shrewd vice-chancellor, Pete Booysen, once or twice leading us round the top of Howard College in an orderly and completely meaningless little parade as a supposed demonstration against one or other violation of academic freedom. As a result, one rarely got genuinely right-wing, government- supporting students in one's class, but I tried hard to mark according to quality alone and not whether my own views were getting support. So far, what I have suggested might have been a deadly if materially acceptable setting, but actually that would give an incorrect impression…

There were a growing number of politically alive and intellectually open young people entering a number of departments. The Sociology people, although in my view mostly mediocre intellectually, were a left-wing bunch with strong trade union connections and a separate industrial sociology programme. The most interesting departments, far as they were from my background, were Planning, with a professor, Mike Kahn, who happened to be the first cousin of the historian Shula Marks, and Music under the guidance of Chris Ballantine. It was pretty easy to get to know individuals across department and even faculty lines.

My first important friendships were with individuals I would never have met in another setting – Jeff McCarthy, a young geographer, Mike Sutcliffe, a planner who would one day become the Durban city manager, Jeremy Grest, a SOAS MA graduate in the African Studies Department, and Rob Morrell, who arrived at the same time as I did to teach history at the parallel university set up for Indians. There were also others, and they were very interested in Marxist ideas and formed a social as well as intellectual community with which I was very much at home. Only in high school and then in Oxford was there any comparison in my life. It was a rich social integument that kept my weekends very pleasantly occupied.

This left community nonetheless was smaller than in Johannesburg. It also had an unusual character because of the historical weakness of the ANC. The Inkatha movement, which controlled the KwaZulu Bantustan and which was led by Mangosuthu Buthelezi of the Zulu royal family, had a presence and an independent basis of support far beyond that of 169 any other Bantustan-based black political party. On the one hand, Inkatha had broken decisively with the ANC over the armed struggle and completely alienated the radical youth attracted to opposition. However, it also rejected the idea of Bantustan independence, supported development programmes and had good relations with much of the more liberal-minded provincial white elite, including that at the university.

At first sight, it was a socially conservative force (although, in my opinion now, with a base not very different from that of the ANC) that seemed prepared to block social transformation, if anything; but, with hindsight, its willingness to take on the ANC created neutral ground that would not have existed had either been entirely dominant. This made for a great deal of space, of independence for somebody like me who wanted to steer clear of the ANC but engage with left ideas in the classroom and even outside. Nobody forgot the fate of the charismatic Rick Turner, a politics lecturer with an unusual background in philosophy, who had studied in France. Turner was banned but he showed no sign of ANC adherence. Nevertheless, a hit squad, perhaps intending only to scare him, shot and killed him after firing through the door of his home in 1979. The atmosphere of fear this spread had only partly dissipated when I arrived five years later.

The other factor in Durban was the strength of the independent trade unions, which had already captured my sympathy. Durban as a port attracted industry, particularly industry using foreign raw materials and taking advantage of plentiful cheap labour and protected national markets. Several major emerging unions, notably the chemical, metal and textile workers, had national headquarters in Durban and many organised workers.

I made friends with some white and also Indian organisers, often very bright individuals who had reached research level as students and were very comfortable with intellectuals; they were people who lived on a pittance by white South African standards, with heads full of politics and amazing drive. They had a big influence on my thinking about South African politics as I engaged with their debates and problems. The still-largest union federation, Cosatu, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, was in fact born on our campus in 1985. I remember well the post-deliberation celebrations when the Durban-based new general secretary, Jay Naidoo, later a cabinet minister, was hoisted high in the air at the party in the gymnasium of the Student Union.

In addition, it was easy to get to meet anti-apartheid professionals, doctors, lawyers, journalists and so on. There was a community based on the need for separation both from the mainstream values of white Durban and from the partisan requirements of the ANC – almost a necessity if you wanted to stay out of gaol and avoid the threat of deportation. Of course, it had close links to sister communities in other cities. Rob Morrell has put together material with somewhat different ideas and orientation on this fraternity. He was a long-time colleague in Durban and a close friend. I put some pressure on him in a crucial late period in talking about myself and my life, which caused a temporary rift, but it was very useful in my reaching the point where I could write as I have done in these pages. Rob has focused lately on the changing group of men who played touch rugby on a university sports field: for some just a form of recreation, for others a kind of social club, and for me also a badge of collegial masculinity, of which I had very little experience when I was young.

He has also suggested this as the background that made possible the creation of an independent, politically engaged journal, *Transformation*, which still exists and which I helped to edit. My co-founders were Mike Morris, a trade unionist who needed a steadier and larger income and thus became a new university colleague, and Gerry Maré. Gerry came with the experience of working on another journal from his time at Wits, *Work in Progress*, which was an important initiative but did not survive the shift to democratic government. A member of the Sussex University 'gang of four', Mike had a brilliant mind, independent and frustrated with the fixed doctrines that seemed politically too dominant in Cape Town. His academic writing is generally excellent but he had little liking for, or patience with, conventional academic practice. Mike, more than anyone else in Durban, changed me politically. I began to see that, while it certainly had pitfalls, it might be possible to be an effective practical politician without abandoning principles. This, I would say, made me increasingly different from the principled academic Marxists of the US, the *Kathedermarxists* as they were long ago called in Germany, who were better by far on ideas than on politics.

We soon took on as editor a lecturer from the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), a quite separate institution established for the Indian minority, which was considerably more substantial than the black African equivalents in the country. It employed many white lecturers and was also increasingly attracting radical young academics or postgraduate students. This was the case for Vishnu Padayachee, who had already looked me up at the ASI in Johannesburg. A very healthy and welcome part of life at Howard College was the willingness of many of us to interrelate with UDW and to forge ties with other professionals. This was dramatically unlike US academic life.

I think one can argue that academic institutions are structured precisely so as to create the silos in which people live their often quite alienated professional lives. It was very good for me, especially given my wide range of interests, that this was so readily overcome, and I could always look beyond the institution. Unlike other ephemeral initiatives that have frustrated me, *Transformation* has so far been a long-term success, although I think it has struggled to keep up the level of excitement that we were able to sustain in the 1980s. I also initiated a cross-department, autonomous set of late-afternoon seminars, which was another focus of cultural and intellectual life that made the university a more interesting place…

Politics as well as academic achievement thus meant that I got to know many of the most interesting students on campus. Relating to them was for most left-wing lecturers, and to a large extent also for me, more exciting and more telling than organising syllabi and marking fairly, although I tried to make sure our courses were well taught and reliably administered for everybody.

The truth was that, after my long years of professional insecurity, I was not going to be the one to make defiant speeches denouncing the immorality of the Pretoria authorities. If humanly possible, I did not want to be thrown out of the country and have my Durban life brought to a principled but disastrous end. I made it my business, even on the telephone, to indicate that I had sympathies with the ANC and was not its enemy at all but at the same time that I had no interest either in a secret existence doing their work for them. On the other hand, I was happy to do whatever I could for the new unions. Here, too, there were limits. Unlike other academics with these sympathies, I was not really able, given my background, to shut up and simply preach whatever line on whatever subject was current policy. I just lacked that sense of political discipline. As a result, I was not taken into any inner circles and was never even encouraged, as I would have liked, to involve myself in night school teaching for shop stewards. In the end, I felt that the work I did do as an academic and through the circles I frequented was probably what I did best. My sociological understanding of the black working class and the unions that emerged by and for them was superficial…

The first years in Durban were perhaps the slackest for me in scholarly commitment. Of course, I needed to get my courses in order for teaching purposes. But the teaching load was light. Very few of the undergraduates had any interest in going on to further study, even to do the fourth, bridging Honours year, an archaic idea still maintained in South Africa and without which it was hard to discern how much they had achieved as students. I was also in a kind of unquestioned position of authority as head of department, a very new idea for me… Only in the new millennium did I create a little team I enjoyed working with, and my two fellow lecturers, one Canadian and one South African, became close friends. This required opening up a second major in development studies in which I did very little teaching myself.

Slowly I acquired a few postgraduate students, but in most cases (Shireen Hassim, Joe Kelly, Lungisile Ntsebeza, Rob Morrell) they were refugees from other unsatisfactory units and experiences, and they chose topics far not only from my personal interests but also from my remit as an economic historian. An exception, very much oriented to economic issues, was the UDW academic and my fellow *Transformation* editor, Vishnu Padayachee, whose thesis on South Africa's relations with the international financial bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the Bank of International Settlements was completed towards the end of the 'old days'. Vishnu has remained a close friend and others too – in fact, most of my PhD students of the past – have remained important contacts and associates. This, too, is unlike what one would expect in a normal academic setting.

I did formulate a research project after a few years. It led to my book on the Indian working class, *Insiders and Outsiders*. A few Indian friends or acquaintances have done me the tribute of saying how well I captured their sense of historical change and experience. Vishnu's advice was invaluable.

However, while I was able to capture the essential line that interested me, I think my failure to do extensive interviewing or real social history was a limitation of the project. I wanted to do something different from the available series of ethnographic studies of Indian life in Durban, such as Fatima Meer's *Portrait of a Minority* as well as earlier books. What fascinated me was that, in the face of a high level of white hostility and legal impediments, Indians chose for the most part to stay in South Africa after the abolition of indenture and despite the blandishments of the state, which wanted them all sent away. Under segregation and then apartheid, on average they improved their situation increasingly, although it is true that after 1960 important reforms placed them in a favourable position compared with blacks. Thus instead of emphasising their anti-apartheid credentials, I focused on social mobility and, in a sense, assimilation to South African ways (conversion to Christianity, shift to English as home language) that worked practically. Through this book, I developed by contrast a sharper sense of the causes of relative African poverty and material failure as a particular complex not explained entirely by white oppression – different from what the usual anti-apartheid literature ever allowed for. I doubt, though, that many African readers have ever read the book and considered this message.

Simultaneously I became more and more preoccupied with the Economic Trends (earlier, Labour and Economic Research) Group. Its director was Steve Gelb, who came back from Canada with a PhD at the same time I arrived at Wits but then moved on to a research job in Durban at UDW. Alec Erwin, the future cabinet minister, was part of the important metal workers' union. Through him we liaised with Cosatu, and in effect the Cosatu federation stood behind this project. Here I gradually got up to speed in understanding twentieth-century South African economic history and political economy and the problems the country was facing at that level. I owe a lot here to Steve and other members of the group, such as Jean Leger, who pioneered the idea of tacit worker knowledge, by looking at mine accidents, and Mike de Klerk, one of the first writers on the dilemmas of farm workers, whose numbers were rapidly decreasing.

Dave Kaplan at the University of Cape Town wrote incisively on the problematique of South African secondary industry. This has been foundational to my later work. Despite one article on the changing situation in the gold mines in a Gelb-edited collection, my designated interest in gold as a key research area never developed further. What I wrote didn't transpire. The very expensive and technically challenging plans to plough ever deeper under the earth for more gold have on the whole not happened, as the price of gold fell. I also felt that Durban was not an appropriate locus for writing about gold mining. To push ahead slightly, when I got the first call from ANC government-related people to come up at short notice to a Johannesburg meeting on gold mining, I ignored it and decided that this was not for me.

Very few Economic Trends stalwarts remained academics. The glory and, if I dare say it, the money were to lie in a host of possibilities, with various levels of autonomy, in working for the new state after 1994. My own idea was to remain an academic but to push towards a research agenda that involved the problems of a post-apartheid economy. This meant a much more intense focus on economic history, not just left-wing history. I would not say that I have never served in any government-related capacity, but basically I stayed out of this world while often having a first-hand knowledge of and sometimes a continued friendship with those in the thick of it…

It is still something of a mystery to me how the ANC, given its feebleness in the 1960s and even the 1970s, could make the comeback that it did, but it was clear by the subsequent decade, and once I had moved to South Africa, that it really had no serious rival in black politics. Given the violence of youth action in key areas (Transvaal townships and Zululand), Cosatu adhesion and the success the party would have in buying the allegiance of conservative rural people and their leaders, including most of those involved in running the Bantustans, it was not going to lose a national election. The 'liberal' opposition was unconvincing in providing a plausible commitment, beyond deracialisation, towards creating a more equal society. The ANC had the support of virtually all my friends and it held the promise of redistribution without bringing the country to ruin.

The negative side for me was the black nationalist element in its thinking, such as the noxious idea that white South Africa was to be dismissed as an equivalent to colonialism – 'colonialism of a special type' – a convenient term for some time. However, I understood from my life elsewhere in Africa that black South Africans were rarely interested in integration; they had the same racialised nationalist impulse as further north. It was perfectly understandable, but the nationalists offered no alternative that was not merely destructive. Moreover, their often-expressed interest in inequality and the like was shot through with a pretty crude obsession with empowerment, not the creation of a social democratic or deracialised society except on their own terms. In addition, there simply was very little expertise in running a modern society or organising a transformation among ANC ranks. This was a revolutionary movement with poorly educated cadres, perhaps relying in the past on using a Soviet example that was highly outmoded. It had very little purchase on people with skills and ideas, most of whom were of the wrong colour for the ANC.

The few individuals encouraged to take up economic policy studies right at the end of the struggle came back with the new assumption that neo-liberal thinking was the way forward, with no real alternatives or even qualifications. This was apparent to me in April 1990 when, together with other Economic

Trends members, I was invited to meet with ANC representatives in Harare. To put it mildly, there was nothing to be excited about at the policy level. This helped me decide to marginalise my involvement there, for which I was probably too unreliable in any case.

In the years after 1994, the ANC did a lot of good. In Mandela's time it crucially blocked and made impossible a coup by the police or military, eager to bring back the past. It created good labour legislation. It equalised pensions and supported the creation of a child support grant. When AIDS spread like wildfire, more and more individuals received disability grants and, after the ousting of President Thabo Mbeki, benefited from the widespread and gratis diffusion ('roll-out') of the necessary drugs to keep people going. A very slowly diminishing quarter of the population receive these grants.

In an age when public housing was pushed back and was even vanishing in the rich countries, the state constructed hundreds of thousands of little houses, secure, electrified and with indoor plumbing, as hand-out gifts to people. Despite all one can say about gender and patriarchy, a great many of the beneficiaries of all this were women and female-headed households.

Women were promoted to high office in large numbers, a rather different story but still in principle a good thing. Under the new constitution, created by pro-ANC liberal lawyers, capital punishment was abolished and homosexual marriage legalised, in both cases clearly against the wishes of most South Africans. The tax system posed a considerable burden on the affluent, comparable to Europe on the whole and far more serious than in America. You could not complain about elections being fixed or the media being shackled in what became genuinely a democracy. And, inevitably, there was lots and lots of affirmative action for positions where power and money were at stake.

There was also much that was negative or that at least blocked further transformation. Much of the legislative customary system that ruled in the Bantustans was maintained, together with a respectful attitude to often greedy and acquisitive 'chiefs'. The widely diffused but qualitatively miserable educational system, very poorly oriented towards building constructive modern habits, skills and ideas, stayed in place, partly at the behest of useless teachers casting about for patronage jobs and promotions.

In my more recent research on development states, I applied to South Africa the model several writers that influenced me had considered in East Asia. A fundamental aspect of the developmental state has been close cooperation between business and the government in Japan, Korea, Taiwan and, now in a different mode, China. In South Africa the relationship with business, apart from pressure for affirmative action executive jobs, was poor, owing to the mentality on both sides of the fence.

It is understandable that the ANC would like to see a dynamic new class of black capitalists. But the class created by Black Economic Empowerment structures remains very dependent on state patronage and tends to cleave close to the old mining sector, notably in coal. Dynamic ideas about economic growth were absent beyond vague projections. The naive commitment of Mandela, Mbeki & Co. to a free trade universe, the very reverse of the old sanctions policy, did nothing for the myriad of low-skilled black workers. Unemployment quickly rose to huge levels with few parallels in the world and this trend was coupled with the shift at work to precarious forms of employment for many. The mines and farms in particular shed plenty of labour.

The ANC simply did not know what to do about this. It had a range of well-meant policies but they were often contradictory and never very well coordinated or dominant. Keeping the ship afloat in the eyes of foreign investors was always a priority. The blockages to developing a dynamic growth-oriented economy, in my view, are powerful and unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, ensuring slow growth or stagnation, with complete dependence on raw material prices. What is termed load shedding to maintain electricity lines at all has become a regular feature of the 'minerals–energy complex'.

Nor does the party know how to knit white and black together, and it tolerates and even encourages by implication the perpetuation of the social-cultural silos that characterise South African society. These attitudes and practices are loosening at the edges, something I try to celebrate in my writing wherever I see the start of a genuinely more mixed kind of society, but there is, to put it mildly, a long way to go.

And affirmative action in the form of so-called cadre deployment, largely connected to race (not that the few Coloured or white ANC loyalists were left out), often promoted stupid, incompetent and corrupt comrades, of whom there were very many. Given the absence of a business 184 class in black ranks and the slow process involved in substantial retraining, the power of the state to intervene has meant, for instance in the running of key parastatal corporations, high levels of corruption as well as incompetence.

The subsidence of the state into a pear-shaped structure, allowing for the payment of as many actors' family school fees, medical expenses and show-off consumer items as possible, is very familiar to any serious observer of independent Africa. South Africa, different only in its greater economic complexity and human diversity, is no exception. Without economic growth, there is no possibility of equalisation, even of opportunity, on the terms of the middle class, and this may eventually destroy the life chances of much of that class, as happened demonstrably in Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Whites have largely fled Zimbabwe and any sense of 'colonialism' being in power must be gone (there are still some fusty survivals of old ways of doing things in the bureaucracy broadly conceived) but at the expense of GNP falling below the level of Zambia. In South Africa, white males continue to form a very large proportion of those leaving school with real competence in maths and science. What can one achieve with a policy of trying to exclude them significantly from positions of responsibility? This is a dilemma which fine talk about non-racialism or social cohesion fails to resolve.

To sum up, my view of ANC governance is a mixed bag. I am not a voter but I would probably vote for them, for lack of an alternative rather than from any enthusiasm for them. Left ideas are important to me still.

I think it will be a losing battle for a middle power like South Africa to defy globalising trends in world capitalism; we have to learn to go with the tide in crucial respects. However, we have to be alert to the constant need to mitigate and sometimes address substantially the consequences for the mass of people. There is no alternative to clearing out a lot of crap that sits in the heads of the population, very much including the black masses, and pointing them in a modernist direction.

I am always delighted to see a black South African doing a great job at a substantial level, but whether people at that level are one colour or another means very little to me at bottom. This is not an approach which is very fashionable anywhere, but as I age, I feel more capable of expressing myself as I really think. This does put me at odds, perhaps sadly, with all the idealists who reified the idea of liberation, are horrified at the presence of corruption divorced from an understanding of the system as a whole, who feel betrayed and like to cling to catch-all terms like neo-liberalism as the source of all evil, or think that the transition of 1994 was some calculated sell-out. One old friend who shall be nameless actually told me that South Africa has 'disappointed him'. He left for Europe, and in fact many of those who gave of themselves selflessly to contribute to the downfall of the old regime and the creation of a new one have emigrated, encouraged their children to leave, and vote for the opposition Democratic Alliance alongside the great majority of non-black Africans. This reaction is carefully not registered anywhere, and I try to avoid it myself.

I should balance the scales a bit with some more positive comments. It is a relief and pleasure, of course, to be able to deal normally with people of all backgrounds and colours. I look at the US of Donald Trump and feel very pleased not to be there or among those who like what he has to say. In the current Covid-19 pandemic, I have been interested to see some new ideas come forward. The head of Eskom, the electricity utility, has for the first time discussed the importance of favouring renewables in energy. Maybe this unpredictable crisis will have a Schumpeterian effect, killing the old weighing us down and encouraging the birth of the new. That is certainly what South Africa needs…

There were two larger changes, however, which do require detailing before I complete my narrative. In the transition years, my social life gradually disappeared. One colleague and much-liked friend after the other stayed in the country but moved to Cape Town or Johannesburg, often abandoning academic life altogether. Union headquarters shifted to the Highveld, too, as factories closed down and most organisers became bureaucrats of one sort or another, sometimes very well remunerated. The tendency grew to see success, which transcended the race line, as something that happened in those two centres, with Durban more like a provincial second-rank city suitable only for an early career phase. Moreover, the need for left-minded people to stick together also largely dissipated. With more money, it was desirable and possible to mend domestic fences and pursue more family-centred private lives. The parties, the expeditions down the coast or up to the Berg, passed into memory. For me, given who I am, this was the main cause of a noticeable and significant depression which got me down for many months, a sense of aimlessness and anomie completely the opposite of my earlier, pre-1990 experience of life in South Africa.

My idea that the university would start to attract many young people eager to be involved in promoting social and economic change in the ‘new South Africa’ was itself naive. Within months of the De Klerk speech to Parliament freeing Mandela and lifting the ban on the ANC and the Communist Party, the conventional white student body we had been teaching in the department, which had been gently declining in size for some years, began to disappear. Already in 1991, the enrolment of majors halved; white parents lost interest in their offspring obtaining South African university arts degrees. What we got in return in the first years was a far smaller number of very poor black students who either failed or just about got a fifty per cent mark, the lowest possible grade for passing, which satisfied them. They were even quite a bit worse than their mediocre white predecessors and basically unequipped for university-level studies. Only the occasional interesting individual entered our doors now… I myself still had just a tiny number of students beyond my contribution to an introductory course. Often I lectured to just two or three at a time, a strange situation.

In 1996, moreover, the University of Natal appointed as vice-chancellor the first-ever woman to occupy such a post, Brenda Gourley, a business studies academic with no record of research or even a research degree. With Gourley, the cold and, to me, hateful wind of Thatcherism blew in. Among other ‘reforms’, retirement at sixty was introduced, the normal forms of staff self-government were eliminated or marginalised in favour of an alien 'line management' system so called, and we were forced into large, intellectually meaningless entities called Schools. It became possible to dismiss even long-serving academics if their services were deemed redundant or ineffectual. For a time, I wondered if I should not try to get out of this system. However, after a few brief trial letters which got nowhere, I abandoned this idea. I felt a bit embarrassed at the idea that I could thrive in apartheid South Africa yet not adjust to its successor, but the reality is that I briefly experienced once again that sense of being unwanted, either at the other South African universities or elsewhere.

I have to admit in retrospect that Gourley was very shrewd. She understood very well what middle-class white Natalians wanted in a university and was able, in the Mandela and early Mbeki years, to balance this very skilfully against the dictates of the post-apartheid government. She made a few affirmative action administrative appointments of people with little competence but in situations where they could not do much harm. Natal also benefited from the presence of numerous very competent Indians who could ably fill substantial academic roles. In my view, they have been the salvation at executive level of the tertiary education system, even nationally, so far. With time I also adjusted to this regime despite my unbusinesslike nature and I have to admit that by the time Gourley retired, the humanities and social science part of the university had greatly improved and university standards were much more serious than twenty years earlier.

Development studies did bring us some decent South African students who trickled back to our premises. Indeed, in the later Gourley years, even our undergraduate enrolments improved in quantity and quality although, since I was the one who carried the non-South African part of the economic history programme, I had mixed feelings about the fact that my teaching was for me largely a classroom escape from South Africa even while mostly staying at home in Durban.

In time, my own problem was in a sense solved by a series of involvements in research projects and teaching. My job was regularised in 2004 on unconventional lines despite the stupid new retirement age, with its presumption of collective ineffectiveness at sixty. I was able to secure a one year contract part-time appointment while taking my pension. This was then renewed on a nonsensical 'mentoring' basis for three years thanks to the help of Raphael de Kadt, who had become head of the Politics School. I was still employed as a one-off to teach that postgraduate course which had become my main activity at the university, in 2009, my sixty-fifth year, after which I ceased paid work there…

Some of my views can be found in a book published by UKZN Press and edited with my colleague, the environmental historian Harald Witt, called *Development Dilemmas in South Africa.* It then led on to years of thinking about the developmental state and how to apply this idea to South African twentieth-century history. This, too, led to a book which came out late in 2018: *Twentieth Century South Africa: A Developmental History.* I think it is my most accomplished work theoretically.

Some of my post-millennial publications have been directly concerned with South African political economy but a lot have been focused on urban history. I took this up around 2000 because I felt it was an acceptable way of doing economic history that used my real skills. It put me in contact with the impressive group of South African academic urbanists usually clustered in Planning and Geography Departments, and it could tap into my strong visceral and experiential sense of different kinds of African cities.

Of course, I also like cities. As a conference at that juncture in London made clear to me, the urban had arrived in African history. The decades of obsession with rural and ethnic Africa were being pushed aside as new realities sank in. I have so far written one short urban book, *The African City: A History*, which I think was quite successful, have cooperated in urban seminars, conferences and student supervision, and had two enjoyable sabbaticals, first in Paris and then in Uppsala, in Sweden, where I widened my knowledge of the literature on African cities substantially. Into the more ethnographic literature often exclusively focused on the 'poor' and thus continuing the usual African studies victimology, I tried to inject political economy and variety into the picture without abandoning Marxist ideas…

I tried myself to organise a move to Johannesburg twice, through the University of Johannesburg and Wits, and additionally to establish a closer link with the economic history programme at the University of Cape Town, but all of these initiatives got me nowhere. All the same, Durban is certainly a more relaxing and easier town and it has a good range of necessary services if quite limited intellectual life. Personally, I have made up for this to some extent with a lot of travel, mostly to Europe, where I make new friends, often of another generation. I am fairly at home in Johannesburg and to some degree in London, where I am lucky enough to have generous family of whom I am fond. This moving around has been a learning experience, as I pick up a sense of other countries, systems, generations, even in these not very happy times. I have made an effort to work as a partner and to write with young scholars, sometimes successfully.

I can imagine any reader of this autobiography will pick up my overall disdain for a lot of mainstream wisdom, and resentment and anger that I was passed over again and again in the country in which I was born and raised.

However, when I look back, I also realise that the trials and tribulations that followed put me into many interesting, life-shaking experiences far beyond that of the college professor stuck in a small college town somewhere in the US. To some extent it has made me a different person. South Africa is a challenging and sometimes very exciting place, and my level of involvement with it is also something different and surprising when seen from the perspective of my beginnings and training. For this, and the extent to which it allowed me to realise my dreams and put them to work, I must be very grateful.