

REVIEW

Contemporary South Africa

Anthony Butler

Palgrave-Macmillan

Contemporary South Africa is a useful and informative reference work on the current geo-political, economic and social make-up of South Africa. Published in 2004, the book is both topical and relatively current in its discourse, examining, through the contextual lens of historical perspective, some of the burning issues in South Africa, including socio-economic development, racial and gender transformation and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The author examines the historical context which gave rise to the constitutionally entrenched system of apartheid and the consequences of this policy, and subsequently offers perspectives on the present state of South African society. The book is the sixth publication in the series *Contemporary States and Societies*, a collection of reference works.

In keeping with the format of the series, *Contemporary South Africa* is not written in formal, academic English and is deliberately presented as an easily accessible reference volume. The book does not make use of excessive referencing, and sometimes avoids delving too deeply into theoretical models and explanations of events described. However, this does not seriously detract from the content and commentary, as Butler is both insightful and distinctive in his observations and remarks.

Each chapter is prefaced with a brief historical background, and explanations of subsequent events frequently refer back to key events and sequences which Butler has previously noted. Butler is also not shy to dispute or contradict prevailing and accepted viewpoints, repeatedly challenging dominant sentiments and providing the basis on which he disputes a particular standpoint. In this regard, the chapter examining the South African Government is particularly apposite, de-mystifying some of the structural relationships between the various organs of the state, as well as the ruling African National Congress party, and concisely noting some of the key areas of strength and weakness in the South African model.

It is the conciseness of the volume that is both the book's greatest strength and its weakness. Butler is able to capture the essence of his subject in such a way that numerous complex topics are rendered simple by his analysis. Although this enhances the book's value as an introduction to the society that is contemporary South Africa, Butler sometimes runs the risk of becoming excessively reductionist, and, on occasion, his style is overly narrative. For example, the examination of contemporary political life in South Africa in Chapter 6 is light on the perspective which Butler brings to large parts of the book, summarising the political conditions

prevalent prior to the South African general election in 2004, without the degree of insight into the social dynamics of the topic of many of the other chapters.

In a sense, the brevity of Butler's observations both intrigue and disappoint, generating a desire for further insight into the issues he raises by hinting at and lightly examining the topical issues that confront contemporary South Africa. Butler's objective – to produce a manageable text – and his ability to capture what are the essential aspects of South African society have generated a work more suitable for readers being introduced to South Africa for the first time than to a reference work for more academic purposes. The author also spends more time on the historical and current state of affairs than on predicting patterns for the future, preferring to leave inferences about future trends in contemporary South Africa to be drawn by the reader.

The book was completed prior to the 2004 general election that returned the African National Congress to power, and, as a result, anyone looking for analysis of the impact this event has had on South African society will not find it useful. However, the numerous diagrams and tables, combined with evidence of extensive background research, provide a superb base from which the author builds his descriptions, and are, therefore, potentially useful if the reader is looking for a factual, accurate and informative overview of South African society.

The publication has, therefore, achieved its objective of providing a useful summary of the conditions and make-up of this diverse and complex nation and, as such, is recommended as an excellent resource through which to begin to understand the current state of South Africa.

*Grant Masterson
Researcher, EISA*