

## Book Review: The South Africa Reader: History, Culture, Politics edited by Clifton Crais and Thomas McClendon

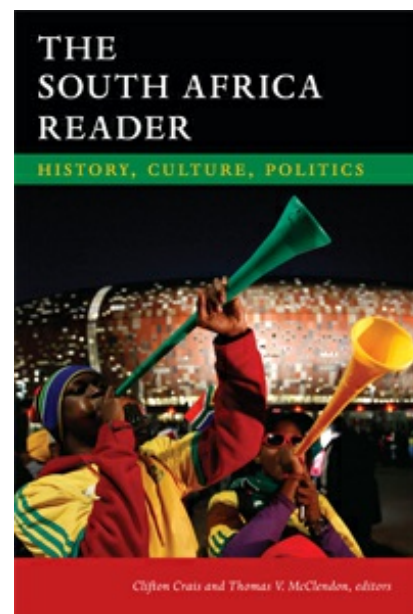
*The South Africa Reader* represents an extraordinarily rich guide to the history, cultures, and politics of South Africa. With more than eighty absorbing selections, the Reader aims to provide readers with many perspectives on the country's diverse peoples, its first two decades as a democracy, and the forces that have shaped its history and continue to pose challenges to its future, particularly violence, inequality, and racial discrimination. **Jason Hickel** finds this gripping reading and a comprehensive treatment of the country's exciting past and tumultuous present – a must for any eager student of South Africa.



**The South Africa Reader: History, Culture, Politics.** Clifton Crais and Thomas McClendon. Duke University Press. December 2013.

### Find this book:

If there's one book that succeeds in drawing the many strands of South Africa's rich political history together into a single volume, this is it. Historians [Clifton Crais](#) and [Thomas McClendon](#) have accomplished a remarkable feat with *The South Africa Reader*, which offers more than 80 diverse selections: everything from poetry, folklore, songs and speeches to reportage, scholarly analysis, and a series of powerful photographs that bring it all to life. This symphony of texts and images is laid out in a clear narrative structure that guides readers through the early years of colonial settlement, the mineral revolution, the struggle against apartheid, and the transition to democracy. The final chapters bring us up to date on key contemporary events, including Jacob Zuma's rape trial, the xenophobic violence of 2008, and the World Cup in 2010. Each piece is prefaced by a brief editorial introduction that sets it nicely in context.



A number of gems in this volume deserve to be flagged up. One is a selection from Mohandas Gandhi's journals that details his experiences of racial discrimination in South Africa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the day he was kicked off a train en route to Pretoria for sitting in a first class carriage reserved for whites only – a moment now mythologized as the birth of his nonviolent resistance. The book also includes the famous statement by the ANC Women's League and the Federation of South African Women demanding an end to the apartheid system of "pass laws" when they were applied to women beginning in 1956. The two groups led a march of 20,000 women to deliver the demands to the prime minister's office in Pretoria, singing "Now you have tampered with the women you have struck a rock; you have dislodged a boulder, you will be crushed!" This set off a crescendo of protests that invited severe state repression, leading to the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the banning of political parties.

The text of the Freedom Charter also appears in the book. Drafted in 1955 at an open-air meeting of 3,000 delegates in Kliptown, the Freedom Charter became a cornerstone of the resistance movement and remains key to political aspirations today. The text reminds us that the more radical demands of the Charter have still not been met: "The national wealth of our country, the heritage of all South Africans, shall be restored to the people; [and] the mineral wealth beneath the soil, the Banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole." Today, the vast majority of the land remains in white hands and the financial and mining sectors remain monopolized by a few white-owned conglomerates, while unemployment hovers around 40% and half the population lives under the poverty line. This disjuncture between the expectations of liberation and the reality of severe inequality is largely down to concessions that the ANC made to business magnates during the

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negotiated transition, as Alex Callinicos describes in his contribution to the volume. The book also includes a text by the controversial former leader of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema, who has recently galvanized fresh public debate about the possibility of nationalization.



Nelson Mandela Tribute Concert in Cape Town. Credit: [Werner Janse van Rensburg](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Another noteworthy text is the famous statement Nelson Mandela delivered at the conclusion of the Rivonia trial in 1964, just before he and other ANC leaders were sent to prison on Robben Island. While contemporary representations of Mandela eulogize him as a champion of nonviolent resistance, this selection reminds us that he cut his teeth in the armed wing of the ANC, Umkhonto We Sizwe, which carried out acts of sabotage against government facilities. Mandela justified the ANC's turn to armed struggle on the basis that all legal means had been exhausted. Yet his nonracialism rings clear: "I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

After the banning of the ANC, the anti-apartheid struggle was carried forward largely by the United Democratic Front (UDF), a coalition of NGOs, churches, and unions that mobilized the mass protests that destabilized the ruling regime during the 1980s and eventually forced the National Party to the negotiating table. The book features a stirring speech delivered by Allan Boesak at the launch of the UDF in 1983. In Boesak's words: "After more than three decades of apartheid, they expected humble submission to the harsh rule of totalitarianism and racial supremacy. Instead they find a people ready at every level of society to fight this evil system." Boesak was an avid proponent of black liberation theology and one of the many church leaders who took a stand against apartheid. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was another such figure; the book includes the speech he delivered at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in 1984.

No account of South African history would be complete without reference to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and this book delivers. Most notably, it features the testimony of Nomonde Calata, the widow of activist Fort Calata who was assassinated in 1985 along with four of his comrades by state security forces. It also includes a selection from Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, which reports on the hearings of the TRC and focuses specifically on the role of women in the struggle. Krog's excerpt reminds us of how apartheid state agents and patriarchal male freedom fighters alike used rape as a tactic of intimidation against women activists. It is refreshing to have these voices represented, and the book could use more of them: the vast majority of the selections are penned by men, and a few obvious female candidates – such as Ruth First and Winnie Mandela – have been strangely omitted.

The final section of the book includes the text of a leaflet distributed by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC),

which many regard as one of the few shining lights on the landscape of post-apartheid history. In its fight for access to antiretroviral drugs for the country's burgeoning population of AIDS patients, the TAC came up against a denialist government and a global pharmaceutical industry that was ready to let millions die in order to protect already-enormous corporate profits. In a resounding triumph of collective action, the TAC succeeded in cutting back patent laws to allow the import of generic drugs that would be affordable for the world's poor.

In short, *The South Africa Reader* makes for gripping reading and a comprehensive treatment of the country's exciting past and tumultuous present – a must for any eager student of South Africa.

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**Jason Hickel** is a postdoctoral fellow at the London School of Economics. His research focuses on Southern Africa and covers issues related to development, democracy, labour and political conflict. [Read more reviews by Jason.](#)

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