

Review

Crain Soudien (2019) *The Cape Radicals: intellectual and political thought of the New Era Fellowship*. Johannesburg: Wits UP.

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The Cape Radicals presents a fascinating history of the New Era Fellowship (NEF), an organisation that emerged in the latter part of the 1930s as one manifestation of the South African anti-Stalinist Left. As such, the book is an important intervention in the ongoing effort to retrieve hidden intellectual-political traditions in early twentieth century South Africa, traditions which have been obscured by the dominant historiographical emphasis on the African National Congress. Soudien's claims about the political and pedagogic significance of the NEF are centred on its grand ambitions, its intellectual foresight and its decisive local influence, as well as the paradox of its failure to establish a wider base and its subsequent historical marginalisation. In this latter sense, *The Cape Radicals* raises questions about the politics of contemporary historical retrieval and invites reflection on the larger historical processes of institutional sanction, neglect or erasure. This history of a relatively small but influential organisation is situated within the larger context of anti-colonial thinking in South Africa and is therefore an important addition to existing histories of left progressive movements. It is centred in particular on the Cape Town intellectual scene and undertakes an important recovery of the hidden social, intellectual and political history of Cape Town itself.

The Cape Radicals builds on earlier studies of the NEF and related organisations such as the Workers' Party of South Africa, the Lenin Club, the Anti-CAD movement, the Teachers' League of South Africa and the Non-European Unity Movement and comes to similar conclusions about the movement's distinct and ground-breaking contribution: its precocity, its novelty, its humanism and its charismatic intellectual force. Earlier

assessments include Chris Saunders (1986) and Bill Nasson's (1990) work on its significance as an early example of Marxist historiography; Linda Chisholm (1991) and Alan Wieder's (2002, 2008) engagements with its contribution to radical pedagogy; and my own work (Sandwith 2014) on its role in the development of a radical literary-critical tradition in conscious opposition to the decontextualised formalism of the academy. Soudien's intervention, while giving new and important attention to the Cape Town-based NEF as a movement in its own right, also sheds light on its distinctive and innovative engagement with (and rejection of) the 'rubric of race' (51). What is foregrounded here is its central significance as an early instance of critical race studies: its pioneering engagement at the intersections of the fields of sociology and psychology and the ways in which 'race is made the object of a critical politics of the self' (19).

Central to this focus, as Soudien demonstrates, is its early engagement with the role of ideas in securing consent; its focus on 'mental slavery', the minutiae of domination and the production of hegemony. For Soudien, the significance of this legacy lies in the building of a 'counter-totalising world view' beginning from the law of the 'non-sense of race' (18). Also decisive was the movement's willingness to imagine new forms of human possibility as part of a re-configured future or 'New Age', something which was manifest in its concerns with the formation of the ideal subject-citizen. As Soudien argues, what is striking about the activist-intellectuals who formed part of this group was their determination to 'think their way from the local into a new, wider space' (6) as opposed to a more inflexible emphasis on replicating the Marxist-Trotskyist tradition in a new domain. In this sense, the study includes important reflection on some of the attributes of a revolutionary political praxis, not least of which is the ability to create an 'autonomous discursive space', free of the need to defer to academic authority (165).

Key to Soudien's analysis of the movement's sociological contribution is its thoughtful attention to the evolution of ideas, the ways in which the NEF's position on the artifice of race – as a central part of the imperial-colonial matrix – shifted and evolved over time. What emerges from a range of empirical details are the ways in which this race-based project developed in dialogue with other perspectives; that it engaged with, rejected and reworked complementary, contending or adjacent political views. As such, the book reinforces a reading of intellectual work as incremental, inchoate and accumulative, suggesting that ideas do not arrive fully formed

but are the product of various processes of negotiation, gestation and connection. In giving attention to the material, social and familial contexts of this counter-hegemonic intervention, *The Cape Radicals* also reaffirms an important understanding of intellectual practice as immanent, context-bound, relational and adaptive.

The Cape Radicals is an example of history writing against the odds; of history-writing in the absence of the archive. It proceeds without significant founding documents, records of meetings and contemporary oral testimony; in addition, it attempts to navigate the temptation to focus on the lives and contributions of exceptional or charismatic individuals by widening the discussion (beyond the irresistible subject of Ben Kies) to include multiple voices and less spectacular interventions. In this way, the history of the NEF is reconstructed in part from newspaper fragments, from the careful close reading of social history through the record of announcements of meetings, letters to the editor, occasional excerpts of speeches as well as literary reviews. In this way, the printed page becomes a partial window into a vigorous, often contentious history of public debate, intellectual experimentation and 'space-clearing'. What is evident here is the centrality of books and the importance given to intensive reading and energetic public debate, of an expansive and dissonant reading practice (often in defiance of established protocols) which became a springboard for wider critical thinking and political engagement. Some of the examples that Soudien enumerates in this regard are the anti-eugenics arguments of Lancelot Hogben (who made a brief but influential appearance on the Cape Town scene in the late 1920s); Cedric Dover's *Half-Cast* (1937); AJB Desmond's *Elements of Vocational Guidance* (1938); CLR James' *The Black Jacobins* (1938); George Bernard Shaw's *Black Girl in Search of God* (1932); as well as the galvanising and provocative force of racist polemics such as Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* (1924).

What these details also suggest is the movement's willingness to engage with opposing opinion, its central pedagogical premise 'that the reader should keep company with authors he dislikes for the tonic effect of their opposing intellect' (Gentle 1949:5). As Soudien notes, the NEF hosted regular debates with the liberal Cape Literary and Debating Society, extended lecturing invitations to more conservative contemporary commentators such as Margaret Ballinger and Dr JS Marais (author of *The Cape Coloured People*) and welcomed rigorous engagement with rival Communist Party intellectuals such as Johnny Gomas. This commitment to keeping company

with opposing views is an important corrective to the common stereotype of leftist insularity and the comforts of ideological consensus. In this sense, the study invites more thinking about the extent to which particular ideological traditions are forged in conversation with distinct and overlapping intellectual-political perspectives and groupings.

As an assessment of the movement's central intellectual contribution to rethinking the 'algorithm' of race (10), this history could have included more reflection on why its emphasis on the fiction of race has not been able to find political or intellectual traction in the aftermath of colonialism-apartheid. It is also a pity that the book does not engage in a fuller dialogue with preceding studies which, to some extent, are treated as sources of information rather than interlocutors in an on-going discussion. Finally, Soudien is careful to situate his study of the NRF as an 'insider' history, one which is partly conceived as an act of homage. In this respect, it also misses an opportunity to think through the implications, complications and opportunities of writing history 'from the inside'.

References

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