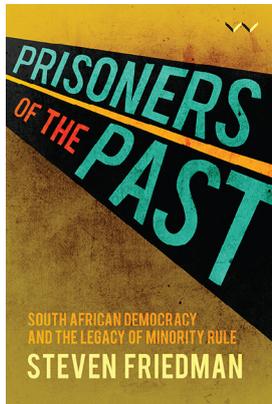




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Prisoners of the past: South African democracy and the legacy of minority rule



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# Negotiating with the past by negotiating in the present: A review of *Prisoners of the Past*

When I was asked to review Steven Friedman's new book, *Prisoners of the Past: South African Democracy and the Legacy of Minority Rule*, I felt bemused. It was surely unusual – even outrageous – for a clinical psychologist to assess the work of a political scientist. But I understood the nature of the request on reading the author's opening quote, taken from William Faulkner: 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.' That we are never done with history goes without saying in the psychoanalytic canon.

Drawing on the corpus of Douglass North, Friedman diagnoses the present South African malaise as a case of *path dependence*, which involves 'retaining the same ways of doing things, the same set of economic and social values, and the same connections even when societies experience great change in their formal rules' (p. 34). In a non-trivial sense, his study is a psychological one: he wants to understand the intractability of our country's social and economic problems by focusing on behavioural patterns, cognitive structures and social relationships.

Towards that end, *Prisoners of the Past* unpacks a series of common myths, one of which is the view that state corruption is a post-apartheid novelty. Friedman describes just how venal the colonial and apartheid orders were, quoting for good measure the words of one scholar – that '[t]here is a tradition of corruption in South Africa and it's a white tradition' (p. 59). But he also makes the crucial point that persistent (i.e. path-dependent) racial hierarchies in the market have created a ceiling effect for an aspirant black middle class – with the *state* becoming, for some, 'their primary economic vehicle' (p. 12). It all started at the dawn of democracy when the old economic and new political elites doomed us to path dependence, assuming that 'a democratic South Africa should extend to everyone what the white minority enjoyed' (p. 44). They failed to appreciate that 'the minority would have to give up some of what it had enjoyed if everyone was to enjoy full economic citizenship. And so, the need to negotiate new economic rules which would open opportunity was ignored' (p. 14).

Another myth that Friedman tackles is the fear among white South Africans that the country is always on the brink of all-out war. He reminds us, rather, that the underclasses are unable to organise themselves into a political force because of their economic exclusion. Politics, therefore, becomes about insiders, and insider politics is 'more often than not racial politics' (p. 104). The paradox is that insider demands are often articulated in the language of the left, with frequent reference being made to social and economic inequality. Friedman cites as examples the #FeesMustFall movement and the pushback against e-tolling in Gauteng; in both cases, the benefits accrued not to poor people but to the affluent classes instead.

Friedman insists, however, that insider politics 'is not a sham' (p. 102) because 'something more subtle and important is at play' (p. 110). What he is driving at, is the anger of a frustrated black bourgeoisie: 'middle-class black people enthusiastically support demands which appear to assist outsiders because they want change, not necessarily because the issue is important to them. The assumption [is that] nothing will change unless there is a crisis' (p. 96). In theoretical terms, that is, 'path dependence can be changed if either the elites' perception of their interests changes (because pressure forces a change or because existing patterns do not offer the benefits they once did) or if the elite which favours the existing arrangements is replaced by one which does not' (p. 43).

Next up is a myth about the South African Constitution. Some regard this document as part of the problem – particularly on the question of land – and so decry it as a continuation of colonisation by other means. But, for Friedman, the constitution is *necessarily* open-ended because 'the more [it] decides what social policy should be, the more does power shift from politicians and the voters to whom they account to judges and lawyers who are not bound to reflect the wishes of citizens' (p. 133). South Africans should not expect the Constitution to stipulate everything right down to the last detail, nor should we wait on some miracle summit of power brokers that will generate a new social compact to replace the one fraying before our eyes. Our fractures run too deep for a national vision to emerge suddenly.

Instead, the responsibility of citizens is to pressure the state into driving a process where stakeholders with competing interests – the white elite, the black elite, the unions and the unemployed – are compelled to engage with one another in a dialectical, back-and-forth manner that is all about hard bargaining and compromise. With the post-1994 deal no longer working, 'any attempt to begin movement away from path dependence must begin with a strategy designed to ensure that bargaining begins because the key interests recognise the need for it' (p. 162).

There is a realism at the heart of Friedman's argument that is to be admired and not mistaken for reformism. He notes that '[a] total break with the past order cannot provide a better future even if this rupture were possible, which it may well not be since no one has yet succeeded anywhere in building a new order which contained no traces of that which it replaced' (p. 153). And that is about as psychological as it gets, that traces of the past will forever be with us. Indeed, it is not always the radical act that produces the radical outcome: 'incremental changes to a path-dependent society can produce fundamental change' (p. 154).

But what specifically generates change? Friedman offers the classical psychoanalytic answer according to which knowledge that is consciously held, is key: 'if changes are born of a *recognition* of path dependence, and are *consciously* designed to weaken it, there is no reason why the result should entrench the past and the power relationships which sustain it' (*ibid.*, added emphases). Yet psychoanalytic theory – and psychology more broadly – has moved on since then. It is arguably not insight *per se* that precipitates change, but *an act of will*. The trouble is that our nation's emotional life is racked with shame, guiltiness and, as Friedman himself acknowledges, bitter resentment. None of these affects is likely to produce acts of will that are consistent with what we know to be true about the world. We may well be prisoners of the past after all.

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