



**South  
Africa**

and **The**  
**Politics**  
*of* **Risk**



***Stan Winer***

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**South Africa** and **The**  
There was a time in South Africa when political activists thought all that was required for change to occur was to dangle before the masses a notion of economic emancipation, and a new, revolutionary government would rise to the occasion. How wrong they were. Eleven years after the formal demise of apartheid, there is still grinding poverty and gross inequality in the overall distribution of wealth. Nor is the situation likely to change in the immediate future. A government elected largely on a populist platform is not necessarily possessed of an instinctive revolutionary essence. Instead of economic emancipation for the poor and exploited, there is simmering resentment over the alarming levels of unemployment and the government's failure to implement meaningful poverty alleviation policies. Singled out for particularly rancorous criticism is the government's plan to privatise state-owned utilities controlling the country's electricity, telecommunications and railways. The privatisation plan signifies a profound ideological shift that has occurred in the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party since the release of Nelson Mandela from prison 14 years ago.

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The ANC won the country's first democratic election in 1994 largely on the strength of its historic Freedom Charter, replete with socialist rhetoric decreeing that the national wealth including "the mineral wealth beneath the soil, the banks and monopoly industry shall be restored to the people as a whole." Mandela himself, in a message smuggled out of prison before his release, promised that "nationalisation is the policy of the ANC and a change or modification of our views in this regard is unthinkable". But just a few years down the line, ANC government policy has turned full circle with an emphasis on privatisation and free-market macroeconomic policies, and a corresponding decline of nationalisation. The government now argues it is bent on deregulating state assets because apartheid was a system built on regulation for the benefit of the few, whereas post-apartheid deregulation is "for the benefit of many, to open up the economy, to broaden its base".

What the government really needs to do is improve the state bureaucracy's level of service delivery. South Africa's 1.2 million civil servants are in many

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instances hopelessly inert and unmotivated. Rampant corruption is just one symptom of the malaise. Although substantial budgets are in place for social spending and poverty relief programs, public service agencies have failed to disburse available funds. Such lethargy, activists argue, is the price the poor must pay for a government that has abandoned the revolutionary fervour and socialist principles that brought it to power. SA Communist Party (SACP) general secretary Jeremy Cronin has warned that a distancing of the government's leadership from its grassroots support base puts it at risk of chaos and anarchy. He cites government policy formulation as an example of how bureaucrats, with the assistance of American and World Bank private sector consultants, are replacing mass involvement in key decision-making processes. Cronin's criticisms sparked a vitriolic attack by President Thabo Mbeki on the ANC's "ultra-leftist" dissidents and its communist alliance partners. During an ANC recent policy conference, Mbeki stated the ANC would be better off smaller than to have in its ranks people who consider obligations of ANC membership to be "burdensome".

A short-term effect of the ANC's astonishing post-apartheid turnabout on nationalisation, its selling off of State assets, and its unwavering commitment to a "free-market" economy can be seen as a trade-off with its former military and political opponents in the interests of "reconciliation". It has served temporarily at least to placate a local and international right-wing consortium of those opposed to change, and it has bolstered investor confidence through the ostensible dissipation of conflict. It also means the government of Thabo Mbeki, while claiming to be "Africanist" in orientation, has opted for a Euro-centric model of governance based on the curious notion of a "Third Way" in politics. Namely, a model of governance situated somewhere between socialism and capitalism, in which government leaders aspire to be all things to all people – a bizarre project to reconcile Marxism with free-market capitalism.

The reasons for a particular set of circumstances need not necessarily lie in a single cause, and South Africa's historical realities are far more complex than off-the-shelf, dogmatic terms such as "neo-liberalism" are capable of capturing. But a perceived susceptibility of South Africa to a hypothetical threat of foreign intervention in its affairs has doubtlessly contributed to a heightened sense of caution on the part of government. This would account in large part for the government's radical turnabout on nationalisation and its persistence in slavishly following a "market-driven" capitalist path in a bid to make itself "globally competitive".

ANC apologists explain publicly that, in the triumphal aftermath of "liberation", South Africa found itself locked into post-Cold War world-historical system fun-

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damentally hostile to its socialist aspirations, a global system concentrated around international monopoly capital, with no opposing force to the United States's increasing hegemony after the disintegration of the East European socialist bloc. The collapse of the Soviet deterrent, they say, made British and American military power more threatening as a foreign policy instrument against those who contemplated seizing strategic Western assets. Hence the South African government's abandonment of plans to nationalise key foreign interests, particularly in the mining sector which, among other things, provides the Anglo-American military-industrial complex with strategic metals and minerals used in the manufacture of armaments including nuclear weapons.

The CIA, of course, has a long and well-documented history of covert intervention and destabilisation in southern Africa. In the 1970s, for example it had joined hands with the South African intelligence community. Together, they secretly groomed and propped up the right-wing Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). The IFP's trade union arm, United Workers Union of South Africa, was formed in 1986, with one of its strongest supporters being the American labour federation, AFL-CIO, which has for nearly half a century been well known as a conduit for CIA money to counter-revolutionary groups. Defectors from the IFP have disclosed that the apartheid South African Defence Force secretly trained 200 IFP members in death-squad activities, including demolition and the use of mortar-bombs, limpet mines, anti-personnel mines and hand grenades.

But that was largely during a time of unashamed Western collusion with SA's former regime of apartheid fascism. Perceptions of risk in SA today, by contrast, have little to do with any real evidence of threats from abroad. Rather, they are shaped by paranoid assumptions of vulnerability. Sure, anxieties over national security are understandable, it is only right that the government should be mindful of potential threats. But meaningful government policy needs to be able to accommodate acceptable risks in an environment that allows the governed to extend their abilities and confidence. Indeed, the defeat of apartheid would not have been possible without the many risks taken by freedom fighters, and in fact the entire history of human progress shows there can be no progress without calculated risk. Never-the-less, there is persistence in South African policy makers' propensity for risk aversion. This might account for the significant increase in military co-operation between South Africa and the US, as announced officially by an American diplomat in the February 2005 edition of *African Armed Forces Journal*. Yet public debate, what there is of it, fails to recognise that the Americans may in fact be exploiting fears about security to scare South Africa into maintaining the

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status quo against socialism. It is a backward slide into an outmoded world of deference and denial, at a time when South Africa should instead be presenting itself as possessing a richer culture of open debate and robust public engagement.

This has resonance in the country's growing climate of cynicism and social disengagement resulting from the government's inability to come up with sustainable development initiatives on the domestic front. More specifically, by importing a Euro-centric policy model, and by remaining averse to risk, the government has failed to come up with uniquely South African solutions to uniquely South African problems. This much is clear from the slow pace of land reform, job creation and skills development programmes. In a country rich with abundant mineral resources and vast areas of unused land, the unemployed and landless majority of people are forced to barely survive on social grants. The mineral resources remain in the hands of foreign-based multinational conglomerates and the unused land remains largely in the possession of a few wealthy land-barons. Social grant handouts to the destitute millions, meanwhile, although providing at least some essential relief, nonetheless keep the recipients locked in the same time warp, repeating their dependency over and over again, and fixating them on their disadvantaged status, instead of providing them with the means to forge their own livelihoods. To be categorised as a social liability invalidates the "beneficiaries" as human beings and saps their potential to take responsibility for their own lives and actions.

Government apologists cite inadequate resources to finance development imperatives. They say the former, apartheid government saddled the new ANC-led government with an enormous burden of foreign debt running into many billions of dollars, with interest repayments alone being the present government's second largest budgetary item. International banks have refused to write off this debt, and failure to repay it would only create problems for the government in securing new loans. Or so the risk aversion argument goes. It neglects weighing up the hypothetical consequences of risks from abroad with the very real risk of psycho-social consequences on the domestic front. Government policy planners refuse to admit that a substitution of revolutionary fervour with risk aversion has had a dissipative effect, which now permeates the national psyche.

Some veterans of the liberation war, for example, have gone beyond disillusion to a desperate, criminal nihilism. Being better trained and armed than the police, they have embarked on a continuing series of successful cash-in-transit heists conducted with military precision – the militarisation of crime. Many raiders have escaped with very large sums of money, while others have committed suicide rather than be captured. The amounts of money involved in cash-in-transit heists

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are small by comparison with the financial resources lost to the greed and corruption of many government officials. A report on corruption prepared by a public services monitoring project at Rhodes University discloses that 48% of local government respondents in one provincial region alone considered it either “not wrong” or “wrong but understandable” to accept “gifts of appreciation” from citizens in return for performing what their job descriptions required them to do in the first place. Nor is bribery and corruption restricted to the lower ranks of officialdom; it includes even some of the top-most echelons of Parliament where a number of ANC parliamentarians are currently facing criminal charges of fraud and corruption amounting to millions of dollars. This is symptomatic of a system founded on principles of unbridled acquisitiveness and the capitalist premise that “greed is good”. It is also an unintended consequence of the generous amnesties handed out by the now-disbanded Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In one of the world’s most crime-wracked societies, the TRC sent out a message that people can commit the most heinous crimes imaginable and get away with it.

The TRC, launched in 1996, was founded on a government-backed notion that reconciliation through truth would entail a departure from the discredited consciousness of the past towards a new, shared memory of the past. This the TRC sought to accomplish through the invention of a new, nationalist biography made up of idioms and metaphors for understanding collective experience – semi-mystical terms such as “remembering and telling” and contrarily, “forgiving and forgetting”. The TRC thus reduced its mandate to a childish level of primness. It tried to create a safe, new imagery that people could identify with, a new social bond, which, despite or because of the rhetoric surrounding it, has served to legitimise and perpetuate a state of collective amnesia about the past. The survivors of human rights were cast as “traumatised victims”, thereby shifting from society on to survivors the stigma of psychological disorder. It was the “victims” who had a disorder, not post-apartheid society with all its own guilt, trauma and denial of the huge material, personal, social and political costs of the former regime’s endeavours to stem the tide of history and progressive change. Many survivors were thus left feeling they were not part of the same world as that of the people around them. Most had survived experiences so extraordinary and so outside the experience of others that they could not connect to the TRC or the TRC to them.

The TRC had emerged out of a debate over whether the criminal justice process or the “truth process” – so-called restorative justice – was best suited to exposing gross violations of human rights that occurred during the apartheid years. The new South African government assumed that society could be cleansed by words alone,

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and the “truth process” was seen as fair, moral, and an effective means to bring about reconciliation. In practice, however, the TRC was informed far more by political decisions and by attempts at appeasement risk aversion than by issues of either truth or justice. As TRC-deputy chairman Alex Boraine himself later admitted, the offer of forgiveness which formed the centrepiece of the commission was the outcome of compromise between white minority interests and the disadvantaged black majority: the price of attempting to secure a “peaceful transition”, in particular the co-operation of the former apartheid security services.

To that end, the TRC deemed that the forces of liberation and those of apartheid fascism should be viewed in the same light. Those who committed crimes in pursuance of liberation were to be treated in the same way as those who committed crimes against humanity. In so doing, the TRC rejected the international precedent that Nazis and members of the resistance movement in Europe were not tried alike at Nuremberg. The Nazis had committed crimes against humanity, whereas the resistance movements had not. And apartheid was a crime against humanity on the basis that it was so declared by the 1973 UN Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid. While about 90 international states are today parties to the 1973 Convention, the TRC itself failed to take into account the fact that apartheid qualified as a crime against humanity. This failure by the TRC is not insignificant, nor was it the result of mere oversight. The organisational structures of the TRC included qualified lawyers and at least one former judge who knew perfectly well that apartheid is a crime against humanity not only in terms of the 1973 Convention but also in terms of other important precedents. These include the Nuremberg Charter, the Statutes for the International Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the Draft Code of Crimes against the Peace and Security of Mankind, the 1968 Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity, the decision of the French Court in the Barbie Case, and numerous resolutions of the General Assembly of the United Nations. Yet the TRC, rather than adhering to international law on the protection of human rights, contrived instead to create a new South African national “memory”, a new nationalist identity – the so-called “rainbow nation”. It was an extravagant exercise in forgetting and an inexcusable betrayal of both truth and justice, because lies and deception in South Africa were neither random nor isolated events in such a scenario: they were structural and systemic, and the present derives from the past.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was the driving force behind the TRC, never stopped singing the praises of the TRC, so tediously parroted by the media: “What

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we found with our Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was that it was enormously therapeutic and cleansing for victims to tell their stories (and) the perpetrators had to confess in order to get amnesty ... This combination of storytelling and confession put it all out in the open. With full disclosure, people felt they could move on." Tutu, who now spends much of his time in the United States, proposes that the TRC should serve as a model for bringing about peace in Israel. But the truth of the matter is that many "traumatised victims" in South Africa have simply not moved on. The TRC helped lock them in a time warp, and it fixated them on their distress rather than encouraging them get on with their lives.

The creators of the TRC believed that, by making amnesty conditional upon full disclosure, truth would emerge, and this would assist a "healing process". While 7,060 individuals came before the TRC's amnesty committee, providing significant information, it is commonly agreed that perpetrators who did not approach the TRC outnumbered by far those who did, and the majority of those who testified failed to reveal information about many of their crimes. The fact that amnesty was conditional upon full disclosure of crimes should have motivated perpetrators to reveal all of the salient information about their crimes. Perpetrators recognised very soon, however, that the prospects of charges being brought against them by the State were quite remote. So far there has been no successful prosecution of any high-profile perpetrator identified by the TRC but who declined to apply for amnesty. Where perpetrators were confident investigators were unaware of offences other than those for which amnesty was being sought, they simply kept quiet. This limited the TRC amnesty committee's ability to determine whether or not perpetrators had completely disclosed their crimes, and also it limited the TRC's overall ability to identify fully the entire, ruthless ensemble of clandestine techniques that underpinned the former apartheid state.

During the long-drawn TRC amnesty process, former members of the repressive apartheid security forces who applied for amnesty also enjoyed the best available legal assistance, whereas former freedom fighters applying for amnesty received comparatively meagre legal aid. Many applications from former freedom fighters were consequently refused, and the TRC Report itself noted this gross disparity but did nothing about it. Many veterans of the freedom struggle are outraged by this and by the generous amnesties granted by the TRC to several high-profile, former members of the apartheid security forces including former intelligence and police officers involved in State-sponsored terrorism, torture and death-squad activities. Veterans of the liberation struggle describe this as "scandalous and monumental travesty of justice". Among perpetrators who were brought to the attention of the

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TRC was former brigadier Wouter Basson who headed the South African Army Medical Corps. According to evidence provided by an accomplice, Basson had murdered more than 200 SWAPO (South West African People's Organisation) detainees at an internment camp in Namibia. The doomed freedom fighters were allegedly injected with muscle relaxants before their paralysed bodies were secretly flung from aircraft into the Atlantic Ocean. Basson was also accused of involvement in a plot to contaminate with cholera the water supply of a SWAPO refugee camp outside Windhoek. He declined to apply for amnesty from the TRC because of an earlier, general amnesty to all apartheid-era soldiers, issued by South Africa's administrator in Namibia on the eve of the country's independence in 1990.

No prosecutions for gross violations of human rights emerged from the TRC process, nor did the TRC release significant, fresh information that was not already in the public domain following investigative reports by a handful of independent journalists and researchers. At the same time, many survivors of human rights violations could not or would not come forward during the hearings. They included those who feared reprisals and those who were too traumatised to do so, and also the transitory ones, ones too distant from the centres of command and of political decision-making, and too silent and obscure for coherent classification. There were also untold numbers of *askaris* – “turned” freedom fighters who were tortured, conditioned or otherwise persuaded to collaborate with the security forces. The South African public thus remains largely uninformed about the drama of a collective past and present that still needs to be heard.

Past censorship and current omission thus represent a vacuum in the South African collective consciousness, to the extent that it can arguably be described as a false historical consciousness. Large sections of the South African public and the world at large have none the less continued to laud the “miraculous achievements” of the TRC in “bringing about reconciliation” in South Africa and providing a “beacon of hope” to the rest of the world. Such praise speaks more about the role of expectations in influencing perceptions than it does of objective reality. It is striking how often people preserve some images in the face of what is clear evidence to the contrary, ignoring evidence that does not fit, and twisting it to make it confirm or at least not contradict popularly held but groundless beliefs. The “success” of the TRC is thus largely a matter of individual value judgement rather than of any scientific analysis. It is a “success” which somehow manages to avoid taking into account the otherwise inescapable fact that to this day the full scope and intensity of apartheid's secret operations are still largely unknown. Certainly the TRC helped slow down

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the revolutionary momentum of the masses, and it also helped placate South Africa's militant, right-wing extremists. But there is a point at which accommodation can overstep the bounds of reconciliation and be seen as collusion.

The notion promoted by the TRC of a happily reconciled "rainbow nation" induced in the public mind a sense of complacency where there should have been a heightened level of vigilance. The South African government's clampdown on what it still views as "sensitive TRC information affecting State security" serves to reinforce the national sense of complacency. This was demonstrated by the TRC's policy of viewing apartheid-era human rights violations strictly in isolation of international precedents, and also in isolation of the Cold War and the Western society of nations of which South Africa was and still is an integral part.

In the aftermath of a long and traumatic history, there was and still is censorship in South Africa. Not official censorship, but a more indirect, insidious and hence virulent form of censorship – self-censorship by the highly commercialised mass media. Clearly, they do not want business confidence in the country to be eroded by the painful business of truth. This means, among other things, that South Africans are not to be trusted to know what's going on in the world or to make up their own minds about the government's aversion to risk. These and other factors have combined to deform some crucial linkages between cause and effect. An entire dimension was and still is missing from the perceptions upon which people normally rely. As a result, errors of knowledge, judgement and insight continue to be repeated after the TRC has disbanded. This missing dimension, and the sense of comfort and complacency it provides to the electorate, could be an ideal breeding ground for resurgent civil unrest. The challenge facing the media industry and the social movements is for both of them to rise above their short-term needs of feeding the headlines. A good place to start would be for them to critically assess their mass communication strategies, and to address the tensions inherent in integrating history and political change.

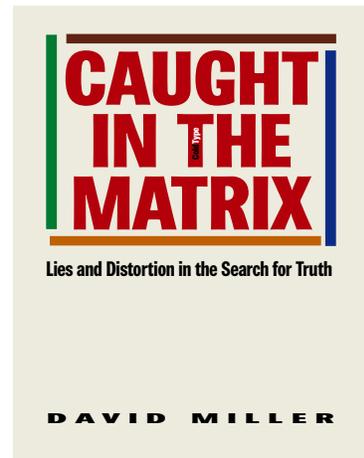
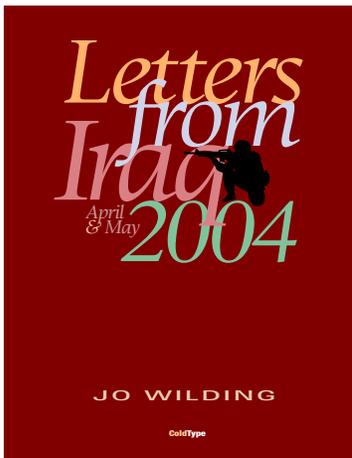
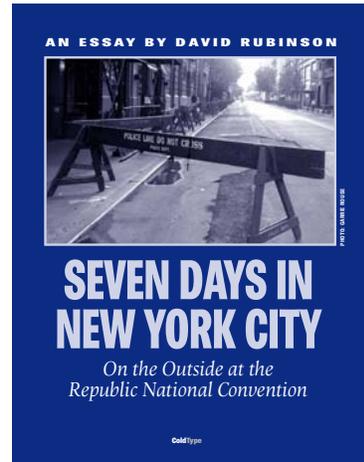
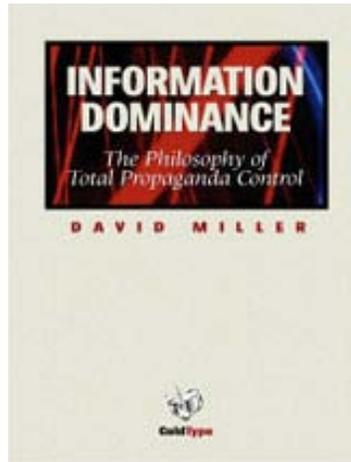
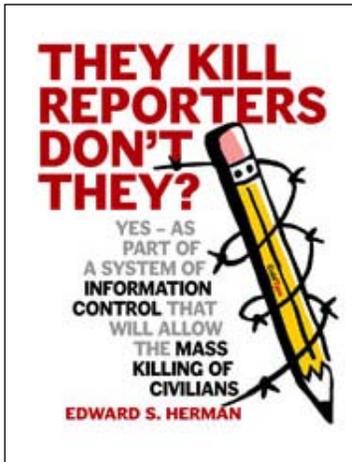
*South African-based writer Stan Winer is author of the book*

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