

**The Cape Radicals: intellectual and political thought of the New Era Fellowship, 1930s to 1960s** by CRAIN SOUDIEN

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For Crain Soudien, Cape Town's New Era Fellowship was an 'engine-room' for the 'flowering of a philosophy of non-racialism' (31). By the 1960s, the Fellowship had been pivotal in 'changing the whole basis and outlook of the liberatory movement' on issues about race (39). Its most important 'intellectual product', non-racialism, that is the rejection of the idea of race, continues to remain relevant, Soudien insists.

The Fellowship began in 1937, established by 'a small group of young ... intellectuals' (1) taking their sense of purpose from an almost equally small Trotskyite group. The richest material in this book is where Soudien explains the strategic imperatives that prompted the development of a programme intended to 'spread enlightenment', and how objections to the Communist Party's alliance with African nationalism 'gradually brought into perspective race as an idea' (64). The setting and timing that fostered the Fellowship included policy switches that sharpened 'the predicament of marginality' among the coloured community's educated elite, the local availability of 'other ways of seeing and being in the world', and the 'visible influence' of global events, not least from recently arrived Jewish refugees with their own 'visceral' experience of racial persecution (51–53). Cape Town provided an environment that encouraged 'mindsets and demeanours' that were 'socially transgressive' (61). An intellectual genealogy linked the Fellowship's founders with earlier sources of innovatory social thought, including Olive Schreiner as well as the pioneering anti-eugenicist, Lancelot Hogben. Much of its output was original, though, and Soudien makes a strong case for considering Ben Kies as a major thinker, who in his explorations of the myths of racial hierarchy turned a significant 'conceptual corner' (123). In his surviving, Ben Kies demonstrated his familiarity with 'what the best and most current science was saying about the factuality of race' (140). His applications of the insights of this science to cultural and political analysis were ground-breaking.

The Fellowship ran lecture programmes, debates and more disciplined 'study circles' between 1937 and 1960. It established a range of local affiliates as well as a longer-lived national youth organisation, the Society of Young Africa. Its founders established the Non-European Unity Movement and manoeuvred themselves into leadership positions of the Teachers League of South Africa as well as editing its *Educational Journal*, a key forum for their ideas. Their most concentrated impact, though, was in a cluster of high schools in Cape Town, for the New Era activists were first and foremost teachers. At several points in his text, Soudien supplies a roll call of their star pupils, personalities who continue to animate South African intellectual and professional life. Ben Kies was also pioneering in his treatment of consciousness and in his demonstrations on how 'ideology was learned' (170). In South Africa, Soudien argues, 'no one else was thinking or talking as they were', Ben Kies and his collaborators (10). And it is at least arguable, that just as South Africa was a 'global laboratory' in race-making (29), so too it provided a 'culture bed' terrain for 'thinking against race' (24), making Cape Town 'a global site of intellectual innovation' (7).

The book is much too short, though. The Fellowship only gets founded one third of the way through the text. The treatment of the milieu that stimulated its formation is much more textured than any of the analysis that follows concerning its trajectory, impact and longer term effects. Even the exposition of Kies's intellectual evolution is cursory and we learn just enough about the iconoclastic contributions of his co-workers in the Fellowship, especially Dora Taylor and AC Jordan, to want to get to know them better. Tracing the legacy of ideas is always difficult and all the more so in a setting in which nationalist narratives constitute 'the dominant historiographical presence' (34). Even so, it would be a worthwhile project to follow the evidence for the ascent of the idea of non-racialism as Kies and his contemporaries understood it to its pervasive impact on the formations of South African liberatory politics four decades later in the 1980s. Crain Soudien supplies a few pointers of how we might do this in his consideration of 'legacy'. Let us hope that he will write a sequel.

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