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Book Review by Helen Andrews

## LOOK BACK IN ANGER

*The Inheritors: An Intimate Portrait of South Africa's Racial Reckoning*, by Eve Fairbanks.  
Simon & Schuster, 416 pages, \$27.99 (cloth), \$19.99 (paper)



EVE FAIRBANKS'S STUDY OF SOUTH AFRICA, *The Inheritors*, opens with Malaika, an African girl who lives in Soweto, getting up before dawn for the two-hour bus ride to the formerly all-white school where her mother has enrolled her. Apartheid has been over for more than a decade by this point, but still the skyline shows a visible difference between black Soweto and white Johannesburg. In Malaika's shack, the power doesn't always work and the walls are corrugated iron. Looking out the window of the bus, she can see white neighborhoods running out to the horizon "until the lights got so dense and bright that they mimicked a sunrise." That is the motif of Malaika's life: the feeling that the perks of white society are close enough for her to see but still withheld from her.

When F.W. de Klerk handed power over to Nelson Mandela in 1994, everyone hoped South Africa would continue to function as smoothly as before, just with different people in charge, as if de Klerk had handed Mandela the keys to his car. Fairbanks uses the car

metaphor to explain her theory for why things didn't work out that way: "De Klerk managed to sell a used car on the verge of a breakdown to a family that only realized, when they got in to drive it, that it was a lemon."

In fact, the car was not about to break down. South Africa was better situated than any other post-colonial nation in Africa to achieve stability and prosperity. It had abundant natural resources, a thriving manufacturing sector, and the continent's best university system. What really went wrong was this: it took European civilization centuries to get from dirt-floor shacks to working light switches. Behind those advances stood revolutions in science, industry, religion, and social interaction. Those cultural prerequisites were invisible to Malaika as she gazed out the bus window at the lights of Johannesburg, but they turned out to be essential.

FAIRBANKS IS A FORMER POLITICAL WRITER for *The New Republic* who has lived in South Africa for more than a decade. *The Inheritors* is her first book, a work of liter-

ary nonfiction that follows a handful of real individuals as if they were characters in a novel, telling their life stories and inner thoughts to illustrate the broader story of their nation, similar to George Packer's *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America* (2013). The three main subjects are Malaika, a "born-free"—that is, one born after apartheid—who later goes to university and becomes a writer; her mother, Dipuo, a former anti-apartheid activist with the African National Congress (ANC); and Christo, a white Afrikaner who was drafted from the family farm to serve in the apartheid-era military and now works as a lawyer in Bloemfontein.

"Activist" is a mild word for what Dipuo did in the freedom struggle. A better word would be "terrorist." She tells Fairbanks about a grocery store in Soweto whose owner she thought was a police informer, so she burned down the building. She pulled another suspected spy from her bed and helped stone the woman to death on her front lawn. Both the grocery store owner and the woman later turned out

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to be innocent. “When I asked her whether she ever participated in a necklacing”—the brutal form of punishment used by the ANC where the victim is doused in gasoline and a burning tire placed over his head—“she just looked down and was silent,” writes Fairbanks. Dipuo’s *nom de guerre* in the ANC was “Stalin.”

**C**HRISTO HAS EQUAL CLAIM TO A HERITAGE of resistance, odd as it may be to think of the Afrikaners that way. Family lore tells of a time in the 19th century when “an imperious colonial bureaucrat tried to collect a toll from his ancestor at a bridge,” and his great-great-great-grandfather “harnessed an ox to the tollgate’s pillar, whipped it forward, and ripped the tollgate out of its foundations.” The Boers, South Africa’s Dutch settlers, were once the darlings of the global Left for their resistance to the British Empire. The Boer War (1899–1902) pitted 400,000 imperial forces against approximately 88,000 Boer guerrillas, and the British were humbled if not defeated. The British then subjected the Afrikaners to a campaign of forced assimilation to make them learn English and accept the crown, to no avail.

This resistance was all the more remarkable because on paper the Afrikaners had very little going for them. They were culturally backward compared to English-speaking South Africans, less urbanized, and poorer. Before the Afrikaner-dominated National Party (N.P.) came to power in 1948, the average Afrikaans-speaker’s income was less than half of an English-speaker’s; in 1970, after decades of N.P. rule, it had only surpassed two thirds. They made up for their lack of economic power with remarkable group cohesion and stern Calvinist faith.

These qualities are embodied in the tradition of *vasbyt*, which Christo explains to Fairbanks in detail. Literally the term means “bite hard and hold on,” but it can also be used as an exhortation: “Don’t quit!” In Christo’s case, it referred to an army rite of passage in which recruits hiked for three days over murderous terrain with all their gear on their backs. Christo loved it. Later, after apartheid ended, he was appointed residential master of a dormitory at his alma mater, the University of the Free State, for Afrikaner students who were having trouble adjusting to a campus in the process of becoming 70% black. He instituted old army traditions like morning inspections, push-ups, and *vasbyt*. He took the boys out to a farm where he had built an obstacle course, with a barbecue for everyone at the end. His strict paternal style earned him the boys’ loyalty. “We all would have gone to war for him,” one tells Fairbanks.

It is an interesting question which of the two is more racist, Christo or Dipuo. If we take the modern definition of racism as about upholding systems of oppression rather than personal bias, then it would be Christo. On the other hand, Christo feels guilty during his military service that life in a front-line town is “making me racist.” He sees so much gratuitous savagery and indifference to human life, like a corpse with brains scattered around it and black children playing indifferently next to it, that he has to resist the thought that “it is only animals who do this kind of thing.” Whereas Dipuo proudly tells Fairbanks, “I hated whites.” Under apartheid, “I would have killed any white person if I had seen one. They deserved to die.”

**W**HATEVER HATE DIPUO FELT, HER daughter Malaika feels more. In her book, *Memoirs of a Born Free*, published under the name Malaika wa Azania (“Malaika of South Africa”) in 2014, she writes that “the unfortunate ‘privilege’ of attending multiracial former Model-C schools” merely condemned her to “daily living in the boiling fire of white supremacy.” She insists that the country is “still trapped in the clutches of white racism” and claims that apartheid will only truly end with the overthrow of capitalism.

Malaika’s feelings should not be taken as representative of the average South African. Her education and her political activism put her in a tiny minority. Her sense of disillusionment, however, is widespread. For many citizens—the unemployed, crime victims, those with AIDS—freedom has not worked out the way they expected.

What fascinates Fairbanks most is the disillusionment of white liberals, which she presents as the result not of things going badly but of things going well. “Many white South Africans told me that black forgiveness felt like a slap in the face,” she writes. They could not forgive being forgiven. They were haunted by feelings of irrelevance, such a letdown after the thrill of participating in the liberation struggle. She tells of a progressive politician who forged what he thought was a deep friendship with Thabo Mbeki (who would eventually serve as president after Mandela) when the ANC leadership were living in exile. After coming to power, Mbeki never spoke to him again. He no longer had any use for him. This man fell into a depression and drank himself to death.

It is an interesting phenomenon. At the same time, no one would say that liberal malaise is the most pressing problem facing South Africa. South Africa has come full circle: Un-

der apartheid, electricity was unreliable in black townships; after 30 years of ANC rule, electricity is unreliable everywhere. Middle-class homes own gas generators as a matter of course in case of sudden outages. Even mineral and metal mines, the powerhouses of the economy, cannot count on a steady supply of power, which is one reason why AngloGold Ashanti, a successor company of Anglo American, closed its last remaining gold-mining operations in South Africa in 2020, the end of a streak dating back to Ernest Oppenheimer’s founding the company in 1917.

**E**VERY SUBURBAN HOME IS EQUIPPED with fortress-like gates and electric fences to prevent break-ins and push-in robberies, as well as with neighborhood private security to substitute for the ineffectual police. Trucks are robbed on the highway so frequently that the port of Durban is losing business to Mozambique, where the roads are safer. Railroad companies find it impossible to maintain service on lines where vandals have ripped up the tracks to sell for scrap. Food imports keep rising as the country becomes less and less able to feed itself due to misguided agricultural policy, aimed more at redistributing land to favored constituents than to producing crops.

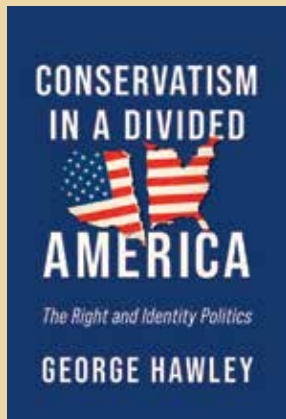
Fairbanks believes that much of this supposed deterioration exists only in the minds of whites. When she is robbed at gunpoint by a gang of young black men and for weeks feels anxiety walking down the street, she goes to “two white therapists,” she explains, because “I worried my reaction was irrational and racially biased.” Ordinary South Africans don’t have the luxury of interrogating so scrupulously their responses to criminality. They just have to navigate their way through increasingly Third-World conditions. Although Fairbanks is not a tourist, having lived in South Africa for more than a decade, she never had to raise a child or operate a business there. Those activities would have made it harder for her to believe that crumbling infrastructure was all in the mind.

How did things get so bad? One answer is: little by little. On her way to school, Malaika passes through a formerly white neighborhood of granite apartment buildings. Over the years she watches as “the buildings fell into disrepair. Trash fluttered everywhere and threadbare undergarments hung off the balconies like SOS flags.” In an adjacent neighborhood of single-family homes, the few remaining white residents frequently call the police on their black neighbors for hosting loud all-night parties in violation of noise ordinances. This is racist, according to Malaika,

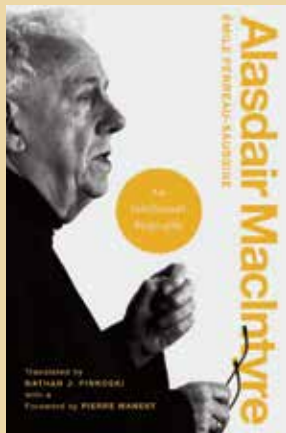




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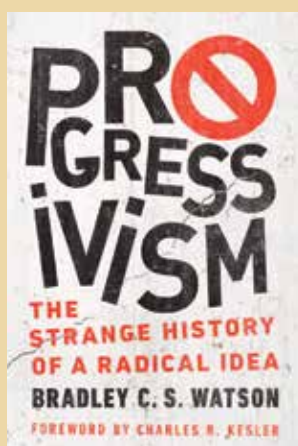
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because they don't do the same when white men mow their lawns at 7 a.m. on a Sunday.

**A** POIGNANT SIDE CHARACTER IN THE book is Michael Buys, a man of mixed race who after apartheid got a job in land reform. The government bought white-owned farms, and it was Michael's job to give them away to black applicants. "I loved the idea of giving land back, even of *taking* it back," he says. He grew disillusioned as he saw sophisticated farms with tractors, irrigation systems, and contracts in the global commodity marketplace handed over to illiterate subsistence farmers. His bosses insisted he carry on regardless. "Why do you ask all these questions?" they said if he grilled a new applicant about his qualifications. "You don't think he'll be able to do what the white people did?"

Fairbanks finds one of the beneficiaries of Michael's program, who was given a fruit plantation. She discovers that "he never figured out how to make it generate revenue and was now practically starving." The lychee and mango trees are still there, but "whatever fruit they produced was left on the tree to be gnawed by monkeys. Most of the buildings—sheds, farmhouses, packhouses for drying fruit—had collapsed and been stripped by vandals of their roofing and electric wiring."

"We blacks saw businesses we thought had no challenges," a failing farmer tells her. "But we were lying to ourselves." There you have it in a nutshell. Black South Africans thought their white neighbors were rich because of the things they had. As it turned out, nice things didn't stay nice for very long without the codes of behavior that kept them nice. Being a white South African looked very easy from the outside, but it turned out to depend on lots of little habits that, even with the best will in the world, would have been hard to explain in advance. (Why *is* getting up early to mow your lawn a better quality in a neighbor than staying up late at a party?)

Nowhere is this gulf more evident than in South Africa's political leadership. Whatever you want to say about the old National Party, they were not personally corrupt. Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom used to refund to the government every month the stamps he had used in personal correspondence. The ANC, on the other hand, has presided over a frenzy of personal enrichment. The current president, Cyril Ramaphosa, has a stated net worth in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and this is likely an underestimate, considering that some lucky burglars who happened to strike his personal farm in 2020 made off with \$4 million cash in foreign currency. Punishment for corruption is rare. Former president Jacob

Zuma is unusual in having been prosecuted for, and convicted of, money laundering. During his trial, he protested that corruption is only a crime "in a Western paradigm."

**W**OULD BETTER LEADERS HAVE SAVED South Africa? This is a standard argument: Mandela was a great man, then Thabo Mbeki and his successors screwed it up. The assumption is that if we could find another leader as good as Mandela, everything would be fine. This is unlikely. Consider Eskom, the embattled utility unable to provide reliable power. What could a new Mandela do about rampant theft from the company's warehouses, where valuable replacement parts are often found stripped of their copper and left useless? Or about the refusal of many customers (including the vast majority of Sowetans) to pay their bills? In 1984, when the apartheid government tried to make one neighborhood of delinquent customers pay higher electricity bills, the resulting riot led to three local officials being hacked to death and their bodies burned in the street.

Those who concede that South Africa has gone downhill since 1994 often blame the "legacy of apartheid." When Malaika's uncle Godfrey is shot by security guards during an attempted robbery of a shopping mall, she reflects that young men like Godfrey turn to crime only because they were denied other opportunities under apartheid. Looking at the persistence of dysfunction in each passing generation of born-frees, the legacy of apartheid gets ever less credible as an explanation.

Could the decline of South Africa have been avoided? Escaping worst-case scenarios is the country's special gift. Pessimists predicted in 1994 that the country would collapse into civil war. Thanks to Mandela's leadership and healing gestures like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, this outcome was avoided. Perhaps wiser preparation could have forestalled the country's other problems.

It is unlikely that the country would be better off if the National Party had simply handed power over to the ANC sooner. Apartheid ended, ultimately, because the Berlin Wall fell. The ANC was subsidized by Moscow and controlled by members of the South African Communist Party. (This used to be controversial but by now everyone has admitted it.) If the ANC had come to power sooner, it would have been a disaster geopolitically, with South Africa's vast mineral wealth propping up the Soviet bloc for many more decades, maybe indefinitely. Domestically, it would have led to a Communist tyranny run by true-believing Stalinists.

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**B**ETWEEN THE TWO EXTREMES OF apartheid and Communism, surely some democratic middle ground can be imagined, one that would have better prepared the country to fulfill the promise of the Rainbow Nation (as post-apartheid South Africa was dubbed). Ideally, it would have been something that gave black South Africans as much political power as possible without risking a switch of Cold War sides. It would have cultivated a class of black politicians and bureaucrats with experience in responsible government, and if possible, a black professional class and commercial class, too.

This middle ground is very similar to the apartheid-era policy of self-governing “homelands,” which were territories within the borders of South Africa, some as large as Belgium, that operated as independent black states with their own leaders, constitutions, parliaments, and domestic policies. Critics dismissed these territories as “Bantustans,” and Fairbanks too calls them “always a farce” and their leaders “puppet rulers.” This is a relic of propaganda from a period when the global Left was required for political reasons to deny that anything about apartheid was successful or well-intentioned. Prince Buthelezi, leader of the homeland KwaZulu, ranked first in a 1977 poll of urban Africans asked their most admired figure, ahead of Nelson Mandela. Buthelezi’s attitude to the apartheid government was essentially the same as Mandela’s to the Soviets: who’s to say whether they are using us or we are using them, as long as my people are benefiting from the arrangement?

The homelands were heavily subsidized by the national government. In 1983, 9% of the federal budget was spent on the homelands. They were nevertheless independent in their domestic affairs, in theory and to a large extent in fact. The Sun City casino, where musicians famously vowed in a 1985 protest song they would not play, was able to operate in the homeland of Bophuthatswana because gambling was legal there, as it was not in white territory. The University of Bophuthatswana, known as “Unibop,” hired radical white professors who had been blackballed in the rest of South Africa. It had its own television station, Bop TV, and its own airline, Bop Air.

It is a core claim of the present ANC government that apartheid deliberately obstructed the economic development of black communities. There is a quote from Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid, that was repeated by literally every tour guide I encountered on my first visit to South Africa: “There is no place for him [the African] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labor.” None of them

gave the second half of the quote: “Within his own community, however, all doors are open.” Verwoerd did not just rhetorically support black education. He presided over its massive expansion as Native Affairs minister (4% of black children aged 7 to 16 were in school in 1938, 41% in 1953) and prime minister. He funded universities in the homelands, over reactionary objections, because “we shall have to negotiate frequently with them in the future over many issues, including education and politics. It will be better to negotiate with people who are well informed and educated.”

**F**AIRBANKS ECHOES THE LINE THAT apartheid intentionally retarded black development. In her discussion of farm redistribution, she writes, “Of course many land reform beneficiaries were under-skilled. That was what the apartheid regime intended.” Quite the opposite. Demonstration projects were held year after year by idealistic government officials to teach homeland farmers modern methods to make them more skilled and productive. It was a source of immense frustration in Pretoria that they remained stubbornly attached to their old

### Could the decline of South Africa have been avoided?

ways, which led to soil erosion and overgrazing. Homeland agriculture produced less than a fifth of what it could have. Contrary to modern clichés, much of the land was of high quality and well-watered.

The government put equal effort into cultivating black entrepreneurs. Fairbanks meets the son of one of them, whose father owned a chain of grocery stores in one of the homelands. “He was the first one to bring serious money back to his village,” the young man boasts. The Bantu Investment Corporation had a lavish budget and a mission to bring private sector jobs to black areas. It had many successes, mainly in light manufacturing—furniture, textiles, matches—as well as garage owners, butchers, shopkeepers, building contractors, and other small businessmen. The main problem it faced was a shortage of entrepreneurs ready to submit business plans.

Incidentally, when apartheid restrictions on freedom of movement were lifted in the early 1990s, Fairbanks’s friend’s father lost all his customers overnight to the formerly white shopping mall nearby, and his stores

closed within a year. This was a common fate. Obviously, the ANC today has its own policies aimed at building up a black middle class. Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) requires, among other things, that existing enterprises hire a certain number of black employees. Often this means stashing unqualified people with political connections in no-show or make-work positions. It would be interesting to compare the results of the two approaches. BEE beneficiaries live in nicer houses, but that may be all you can say for them.

**T**HE MOST RECENT EDITION OF THE STANDARD textbook *South Africa: A Modern History* (2000) states that education under apartheid was based on an “assumption of an inferior potential in African minds” and was “explicitly designed to prepare blacks for an inferior place in society.” According to the Afrikaner historian Herman Giliomee, these false claims are absent from the 1987 edition. The change, he observes, “is a reflection of the fact that a new government preoccupied with white racism had come to power.” The brazenness of the falsehood is frankly puzzling. There is quite enough objectionable about apartheid that it is hard to understand why anyone would need to lie about it.

But they do. In 2018, the Johannesburg-based advertising firm TBWA\Hunt\Lascaaris won a national award for its radio campaign titled “Past and Present” on behalf of the Apartheid Museum. It juxtaposed quotations from Verwoerd—“Blacks cannot rule themselves,” “The black man is the symbol of racial inferiority and laziness”—with quotations from Donald Trump—“Laziness is a trait in blacks, it really is, I believe that”—and ended with a voiceover intoning: “There has never been a better time to learn from the mistakes of our past.” It turned out that the Trump line was taken from an unreliable memoir by a former Trump employee and is probably made up. The agency was forced to return the award.

The Verwoerd quotes were equally made up. They were not even the kind of thing he might have said. The whole point of apartheid was that blacks *could* rule themselves, in their own homelands. One can read all 735 pages of Verwoerd’s collected speeches and find not a single word about black inferiority. “Their culture means just as much to them as ours does to us; it is just different,” he told colleagues. The only possible explanation for how no one, including the supposed experts at the Apartheid Museum, bothered to catch such an implausible fabrication is that the leaders of white South Africa have achieved the distinc-



tion of being “libel-proof,” their reputations so bad that to slander them is impossible under the law.

**F**AIRBANKS BELIEVES THAT SOUTH AFRICA is “a story that illuminates what lies ahead of us.” The 1994 handover compressed into the blink of an eye a transition that the United States is undergoing more slowly: the regime’s old heroes “became losers who had labored for a collapsed and discredited cause,” and “people of color took their places in the president’s office, in Parliament, on the committees that write the school history books.” The defining characteristic of white South Africans today is their lack of moral standing. They have been so discredited over apartheid that they have no basis for making claims in the public sphere. This lack of moral authority is more important than their being demographically outnumbered, a fate that is still a long way off for whites in the U.S. (but not unthinkable, as they’ve gone from 89% of the country to 58% in two generations). It should be obvious to everyone by now that this lack of moral standing is what Black Lives Matter and the 1619 Project have in mind for white Americans. They want to take the same moral certainty with which we condemn Jim Crow and extend it to everything white Americans have ever done until, like white South Africans, we feel grateful just to have our continuing presence tolerated.

Segregation is the point of comparison that comes to mind when most Americans think of South Africa. Apartheid-era diplomats urged their American counterparts to think instead of Indian reservations, a closer analogue if our Native American population had been in the tens of millions instead of the low hundred thousands. A still better comparison than either is the southern border. Imagine if one day the international community decided that Latin Americans should be able to vote in

U.S. elections, since our economy depends on their labor and their fates are affected by U.S. policies. The counterargument would have nothing to do with whether Latin Americans are good people or possess human rights. It would be that they outnumber us more than two to one and would, by sheer numbers, render native voters null overnight. That was Verwoerd’s case for apartheid: strictly mathematical. As long as blacks were 80% of the population and voting as a solid racial bloc, it would be folly to put the two communities into one democracy.

The argument that borders are the moral equivalent of apartheid is not just theoretical; it is being made today. The quality of life we enjoy in America is the result of exclusion. Otherwise, entire favelas would pack up and move here. On what moral basis do we keep them out? Do the people of Latin America not deserve nice things? One might ask why they can’t have nice things in their own country, but the answer would probably be that it is somehow our fault. Certainly it is not anything the Latin Americans are doing. That would imply that they are incapable of sustaining nice things, and that would be racist. Eventually the only reply to these liberal gotchas is to say that foreigners can’t have our country because it’s ours. That is precisely the kind of basic moral claim that the current Left would like to deprive Americans of the authority to make.

**A** FEW WHITE SOUTH AFRICANS HAVE picked themselves up off the dirt and decided to make a go of political participation under the new regime. Most have rallied to the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (D.A.). If democracy worked the way theorists assumed, the D.A. would be a soaring success. It is a center-left, colorblind party with an excellent record of good government at the state and local level.

Its white politicians, such as Tony Leon, have impeccable anti-apartheid credentials. The contrast in competence with the ruling party is stark, admittedly not difficult considering the ANC can’t keep the water running. Yet in the 2019 election, when the D.A. had a black party leader, it received 4% of the black vote. In no election since its founding has its share of the black vote escaped single digits.

White South Africans cannot look forward to a day when they are no longer blamed for everything that goes wrong in their country. As apartheid recedes into the past, its role as a political explanation grows. A 2018 national survey found that 77% of black South Africans said they had “never personally experienced racism directed against them.” Still every ANC politician blames lingering racial disparities on the legacy of racism. The white population of South Africa could shrink to five Afrikaners in a remote corner of Gauteng, and no doubt Malaika would still be harping on about “the boiling fire of white supremacy.”

So white South Africans will never achieve any political power no matter how hard they try, and they will never cease to be blamed for the country’s misfortunes. That is the very definition of a dead end. When people say America is becoming more like South Africa, they usually mean that California can’t keep the lights on and private security is a booming business for middle-class neighborhoods in Baltimore and Portland. That is all part of it, but the most South African thing about our politics is the current effort to push white Americans into that same position as permanently powerless scapegoats. It is bizarre that this is something Eve Fairbanks would welcome.

*Helen Andrews is a senior editor at the American Conservative and the author of Boomers: The Men and Women Who Promised Freedom and Delivered Disaster (Sentinel).*



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