

Rocco W. Ronza (2024) *L'Africa australe. Il Sudafrica e i suoi vicini*. Bologna: Il Mulino

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Caught between West and East, between opposing pulls and models, Southern Africa will once again, in the coming years, have to decide its direction of travel. Yet it seems unlikely that it will choose to abandon altogether the trajectory of political and economic development toward which history, though so full of contradictions, has steered it thus far (Ronza, 2024: 161)<sup>1</sup>.

Rocco Ronza offers a wide-ranging reconstruction of the political trajectories of Southern Africa, a region that has all too often slipped to the margins of both public debate and scholarly attention (Ronza, 2024: 7). Despite the significant progress of liberal, multi-party democracy over the past decades, public and policy discourses continue to be shaped by powerful simplifications: migration flows, the region's role as a supplier of strategic resources, and a persistent tendency to treat Africa as an undifferentiated whole.

Already in the opening chapter, Ronza insists that “unpacking Africa into regions” is neither a straightforward nor a neutral operation (Ronza, 2024: 8). Southern Africa, he argues, is set apart from the rest of the continent by at least two structural features. First, it displays a markedly unipolar configuration in demographic and economic terms: South Africa weighs disproportionately on the regional balance. Second, it combines relatively higher levels of economic development with more robust democratic institutions: four of the seven African economies classified by the World Bank in 2021 as upper-middle income—South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Mauritius—are located precisely in this part of the continent. At the same time, Southern Africa is the only African region with a historically positive migration balance. Yet, when measured through the Gini index—among the most widely used indicators of income inequality—it also

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Italian are by the author, unless otherwise stated.

appears as one of the most unequal regions in the world. The introductory pages thus frame Southern Africa as a historically specific configuration of prosperity and exclusion, foreshadowing themes that are further developed in the subsequent, box-rich chapters.

The first chapter addresses the historical formation of Southern Africa. Ronza revisits J.A. Hobson's classic analysis (1996), which distinguishes late nineteenth-century European imperialism from earlier forms of colonial expansion. Hobson drew a sharp line between "settler colonialism"—based on the permanent appropriation of territory and the expulsion or assimilation of indigenous populations—and "exploitation colonialism" that rest primarily on the subordination and economic exploitation of the colonised. Ronza engages this distinction through the lens of Veracini (2013), situating Southern Africa within a broader history of settler projects. The discussion then turns to the Scramble for Africa (1880–1914), the expansion of European capitalism, and the first wave of territorial consolidation; here Box 1.1 focuses on the Boers and the Afrikaners, key actors in the construction of regional political and identity structures. Ronza closes with the emergence of representative government, the debate on suffrage, and the tension between "civilisation" criteria and claims to self-government. The crisis and eventual dismantling of segregationist regimes mark the threshold of the twentieth century and prepare the ground for later conflicts.

The second chapter examines the legacies of racial segregation and the challenges of democratic transition. The figure of Nelson Mandela, presented as the "face of solidarity", embodied for many observers the hope of an "end of history", or at least the end of the intense ideological conflicts that had marked the short twentieth century (Ronza, 2024: 37). Ronza contrasts two major interpretive traditions. On the one hand, a liberal perspective locates the roots of underdevelopment in the exclusion of black populations and in systematic violations of the universalist principles on which liberalism claims to rest. On the other, a Marxist perspective—formed within the Third International and later influential in Western universities—treats racial segregation and capitalism as profoundly intertwined. From this angle, eliminating inequality cannot be reduced to repealing discriminatory laws: it requires intervening in the underlying relations of production; in this sense box 2.1 surveys the main

liberation movements of Southern Africa. Ronza then turns to welfare and social policy. The end of legally codified segregation leads to a formal equalisation of access to services and benefits, accompanied by a reallocation of social spending toward poorer segments of the population. Yet expectations of sustained economic growth remain largely unfulfilled; box 2.2 takes up the highly contentious land question across the region. From the late 2000s onwards, the need to preserve cohesion within the black majority becomes a central concern of ruling parties, especially in the run-up to elections.

The third chapter, devoted to post-apartheid South Africa, reconstructs what Ronza aptly describes as a contradictory trajectory. South Africa appears as a “South African mosaic”, a deeply heterogeneous and ethnically divided society (Ronza, 2024: 66). The apartheid regime had aimed to build a welfare state comparable to those of industrial democracies but structurally organised around four legally defined population groups. In 1958, the launch of “Grand Apartheid” ushered in an ambitious plan to reorganise the entire territorial structure, seeking to transform the “homelands” into self-governing entities—an arrangement rife with both formal and substantive ambiguities; box 3.1 is devoted to Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the Zulu question, and the politics of ethnicity. The chapter then follows the rise of the African National Congress (ANC) as governing party, from the interim constitution of 1993 to the first democratic elections of 1994 and the construction of a new social bloc. Yet the book is clear in highlighting a central tension: despite undeniable achievements, the structural poverty affecting the black majority remains one of the unresolved problems of the post-apartheid order.

Chapter four shifts the focus to Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi. After revisiting the “Scramble for Africa” and the exploratory journeys of David Livingstone from 1851,—box 4.1 turns to Cecil Rhodes and the contradictions of British imperialism—Ronza examines the partnership frameworks devised in the late colonial period, the passage to independence, and the consolidation of single-party regimes, all the way to the democratic transitions of the 1990s and 2000s. Zimbabwe occupies a prominent place in this narrative: presented as a “laboratory not only African” (Ronza, 2024: 93), it is marked by the land seizures of 2000 and a severe economic and political crisis that

sharply differentiates it from both Zambia and Malawi; box 4.2 offers a portrait of Robert Mugabe as “the last imperialist”.

The fifth chapter analyses the political paths of Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, and Eswatini. Attention is paid to institutional architectures and historical memory: box 5.1 revisits the genocide of the Herero in 1904, tracing the ways in which that episode continues to reverberate in contemporary politics. While each country follows a distinct trajectory, Ronza shows how they collectively mirror broader regional trends in state-building, growth, and inequality.

The sixth chapter turns to Angola and Mozambique, with a focus on the struggle against Portuguese colonialism and the subsequent transition from single-party systems to multiparty democracies. In Mozambique, the first pluralist elections of 1994 follow peace agreements mediated by the Italian government; in Angola, a more protracted and violent process ultimately leads to a comparable stabilisation.

The final chapter situates Southern Africa within the international system across three historical phases. 1) From 1902 to 1945, the region moves from the Anglo-Boer War to the creation of the Union of South Africa (1910) and the progressive transformation of the British Empire into a more federal configuration, culminating in the Commonwealth. The doctrine of “trusteeship” – the “responsibility to tutelage” of colonised peoples – plays a central role. Here box 7.1 is devoted to Ian Smith and the relationship between South Africa and international order. 2) Between 1945 and 1990, South Africa participates in the founding of the United Nations but increasingly becomes the stage upon which the contradictions between self-determination, human rights, and Cold War logics are played out. Apartheid comes into direct conflict with the universalist principles articulated by the post-1945 international community. 3) From 1990 to the present, the end of the Soviet threat, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and a series of Euro-American agreements favour negotiated transitions to majority rule, without revolutionary ruptures or large-scale nationalisations. At the same time, the rise of non-democratic powers such as China and Russia offers alternative sources of support and models of development. Yet, as Ronza underlines, the core partners of the region remain the United States, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

Taken as a whole, Ronza’s book stands out for its analytical clarity, historical depth, and careful attention to long-term structures.

The use of thematic boxes is not a mere didactic device; it allows the author to weave together biographies, concepts, and critical episodes in a way that makes the volume accessible without sacrificing complexity. For scholars and advanced students alike, it offers a concise but remarkably dense introduction to Southern Africa's political history. One may regret that the work is available only in Italian but this, however, does not diminish its value. On the contrary, the book's clear architecture, its judicious engagement with both liberal and Marxist traditions of interpretation, and its insistence on the entanglement of domestic and international dynamics make it a particularly timely contribution for anyone seeking to understand why Southern Africa, "caught between West and East, between opposing pulls and models", is unlikely to abandon the long, uneven trajectory along which history has pushed it so far (Ronza, 2024: 161).

## References

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