

BOOK REVIEW

Narnia Bohler-Muller, Vasu Reddy, Gregory Houston, Maxi Schoeman, and Heather Thuynsma, eds. *The Texture of Dissent: Defiant Public Intellectuals in South Africa*. Cape Town: Best Red, an imprint of Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2022. ix + 466 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$45.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-928246-57-2.

Reviewing a biographical compendium like this one can be a challenge. It is impossible, of course, to treat every single entry. Yet it seems unfair to single out only a few, and churlish to complain about inevitable lacunae. The best way to grasp this volume, then, is to evaluate the introductory material, the organization and thoroughness of the entries in general, and, of course, the very definition of “public intellectual” proposed by the editors and exemplified by their choice of biographical subjects.

The Texture of Dissent is a companion volume to a similar HSRC title published in 2020, *The Fabric of Dissent: Public Intellectuals in South Africa*, edited by the same capable team. That first volume, the five editors note, “highlighted the project of ‘dissent’ as a shaping driver of intellectual thought and liberation” (1) in South Africa. This new one, they claim, is more focused on “defiance,” although the shift in nomenclature (from “fabric” to “texture” as well) does little to distinguish in any substantive fashion the seventy-four pithy “critical biographies” (5) in the new volume from the seventy-seven in the earlier one.

Drawing on Fanon, Gramsci, and Sartre, the editors’ introduction to *Texture of Dissent* also leans heavily on Edward Said’s descriptions of the adversarial role of critical intellectuals (Said himself tended to use “defiance” and “dissent” interchangeably). The sharpest distinction from the previous volume really is generational—most of the figures in *The Texture of Dissent* are still with us, while only about a quarter of those profiled in *Fabric* remain alive. As the editors point out, the intellectuals considered in the first volume represented a South African generation shaped by Union, war, segregation, and the largely above-ground struggle against apartheid in the first dozen years of National Party rule (1948–60). Those treated in the new volume mostly came of age instead after the advent of the apartheid state in 1948, and then became fully active at the height of apartheid repression after 1960. This meant their political and cultural engagement took place in opposition to a full-blown police state that made the potential cost of any defiance or dissent extremely high: banning, exile, imprisonment, torture, or death. Under such perilous circumstances, perhaps, is exactly where mere “dissent” crossed over to “defiance.” The new volume also focuses on those intellectuals whose praxis has been shaped by the ambivalences of the postapartheid era, as the erstwhile liberation movement took on the prosaic tasks of


governance, often becoming the target rather than the vehicle of critical intellectual engagement. “As there was opposition against apartheid” by public intellectuals, the editors suggest, “there is now a strong opposition to socioeconomic inequality” (11) that has persisted under the ANC and in the new democratic dispensation. Above all, in an oft-repeated phrase, the volume highlights those who “speak truth to power” (e.g., 235) in all its guises.

The editors’ brief but useful introductory essay seeks to define the meaning and role of the public intellectual. Although conceding that such critical engagement can sometimes occur on behalf of the powerful and the status quo—indeed, Verwoerd might even fit the original template!—the editors at one point describe the public intellectual rather narrowly as someone who “fosters a national consciousness that aims at liberation from domination” (6). This definition, while provocative, begs the by no means settled question of precisely what “national consciousness” is (or was) in the South African context, and risks neglecting its relationship to class, gender, and other crosscutting categories of analysis. Moreover, it unnecessarily disregards those dissenters who brought to the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles an explicitly internationalist bent.

Generally speaking, however, the introduction offers a bold yet supple framework for the more than six dozen well-researched biographical sketches that follow. Reprising the template established by the first volume, the editors loosely group their public intellectuals into four categories: political, cultural, academic, and organic. Naturally, these categories overlap at times, which is all to the good. This heuristic effectively conveys the central point that “intellectuals originate in diverse publics” (12), even while reminding readers that such “publics” did not always inhabit distinct spheres and that those who engaged them often had peripatetic careers. At its most inclusive, the editors demonstrate, the concept of the public intellectual bridges the worlds of creative, intellectual, political, and what they call “performative” (3) engagement with the pressing social problems of the day.

In general, the biographical entries themselves—1,000–1,500 words each—are concise, accurate (warts and all), and informative, as well as exceptionally well-documented with footnotes. One of the pleasures of this volume is that, in comparison to what one finds on the internet, the entries—prepared as they are by a coherent team with a wide range of expertise—retain a certain consistency that encourages cross-reading and comparison. And it is refreshing to find in the same volume politicians (of various party affiliations), clerics, poets, photographers, stand-up comics, novelists, musicians, historians, journalists, feminists, jurists, and even a puppeteer.

Living as we do in an information-saturated era, in which biographical data is readily available on the internet, whether through Wikipedia or South African History Online, it seems fair to ask if there is still a place for the kind of reference work represented by *The Texture of Dissent*. The greatest gift of this comprehensive and well-organized volume (and its predecessor) is the demonstration that there is.

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