

A LOT OF '50s IN THE '80s

BY ROBERT W. POOLE, JR.

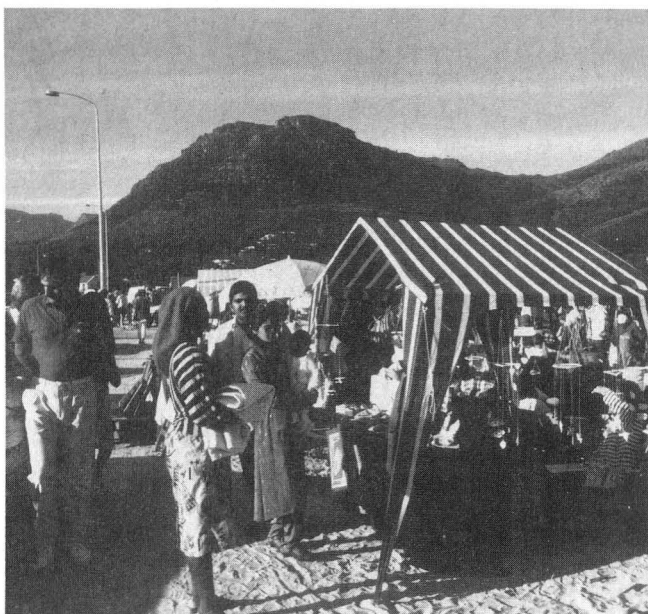
Even just two weeks traversing South Africa with eyes and ears open reveal a great deal more than our stereotypes about this troubled land. South Africa's political and social situation is more complicated than most Americans imagine. And there has been more progress toward equality for blacks in the past five years than most realize.

Despite outward signs of modernity, South Africa's urban culture is a strange mixture of the 1950s and the 1980s. Video stores, office towers, current rock music, the latest Mazdas and Mercedes models, the ubiquitous personal computer, hypermarkets, "The Cosby Show"—all these can make an American feel right at home. Yet in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, everyday living seems a throwback to the America of the '50s, before antismoking and decaffeinated coffee, the civil rights movement, and women's equality.

Take the role of women. We learned that middle-class women, though they may work, generally don't have full-time careers. When we saw "ladies bars," it was explained that letting women drink in bars is still a recent enough innovation that bars which allow women to join in are so designated.

We were amazed to find just four pages of restaurant listings in the yellow pages for Cape Town, a major city that is the hub of a 1.5-million-person metro area. People obviously do not dine out very much in South Africa. My hypothesis: so many middle-class people can afford servants that eating and entertaining at home is much more convenient than for Americans.

The cheap labor provided by urban blacks shows up in many ways. Parking lots and garages don't use ticket-spitters; a black man hands you the ticket. In a Wimpy's (equivalent to McDonald's), we confused the woman behind the counter by ordering there, with the intention of taking our food to a table. You only order



Many elements of apartheid have crumbled in the cities: At a crafts fair near Cape Town, people of all races mix freely.

at the counter for "take away." Otherwise, they come to the table to take your order. (This personal service has its downside—fast food isn't so fast.)

To an American observer, apartheid seems clearly on the way out. Today's situation is, de facto, much like that of the South in the 1950s, when black people did not have the vote in practice and with few exceptions lived in "colored towns" adjacent to the big cities.

When I was a boy in Miami in the early '50s, there was greater de facto segregation than exists today in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Blacks went to separate schools, had to ride in the back of the bus, and lived only in ghettos like Liberty City. They were not employed in jobs that would bring them into direct contact with whites—for example, as clerks in department stores. We even had separate drinking fountains in the Food Fair.

Much of South Africa's legally mandated racial segregation has been swept away. One of apartheid's main pillars was the hated pass laws, designed to control the movement of blacks and enforced with hundreds of thousands of arrests each

year before being abolished in 1986. "Influx control" was based on the idea that blacks had no legal right to be in urban areas—they would be tolerated only temporarily to meet short-term labor needs. By dismantling this coercive apparatus, the government has conceded the reality that the urban black population is an integral part of the economy.

Many other elements of apartheid have crumbled in the cities. From street-hawkers' sidewalk stands to the most upscale malls, blacks, "coloreds" (mixed race), and Indians can be seen on both sides of the counters, along with whites. Blacks are increasingly free to own businesses, not just in their townships but in the main city business districts. In the large cities, we observed whites riding in black-owned taxis—which started out as a phenomenon of the underground economy and now number 100,000.

Mixed-race couples are no longer against the law. And blacks are finally permitted to own land and buy houses—though only in black townships so far and, to a limited degree, in the legally integrated "gray areas" that are just emerging. But the Group Areas Act still prevents most blacks from choosing where to live, and they have no vote except in largely meaningless local council elections.

Although housing segregation and denial of the vote were not part of U.S. law in the '50s, they were de facto realities in significant portions of the country. And blacks' economic roles were far more restricted than those of South African blacks today. In that respect, South Africa's urban blacks are further ahead than Miami's blacks were in 1952. The big question is how and when they will achieve full equality before the law.

Unfortunately, the Botha government and well-meaning American liberals seem to be making things worse rather than better. While desperate for a favorable

world image, the South African government goes out of its way to obstruct the free flow of information. Under a three-year-old state of emergency, it has banned TV coverage of disorders in the townships, for example. And when I truthfully answered a question on my visa application indicating that I had had articles published, I was required to provide samples and to submit a notarized statement that I was going to South Africa only as a tourist.

The government repeatedly squelches legitimate efforts to build the kinds of social and political structures necessary for democracy. Last fall, the fledgling (mostly white) End Conscription Campaign was banned. And the government has leveled charges of high treason against leaders of the Alexandra Action Committee, a black self-help organization in one of Johannesburg's townships.

Still, despite the state of emergency, I found more lively political expression than I'd expected. Newspapers editorialize freely, denouncing various government policies and urging that ANC leader Nelson Mandela be freed. Political graffiti—representing all points of view—is common. Every book store we visited included a whole section of books debating South Africa's future and the wisdom of apartheid. South Africans seem to love bumper strips, too, including one commemorating a tomato-throwing incident that involved President P. W. Botha—"I [tomato picture] P. W."

Newspapers do report bombings, such as the explosion of a limpet mine in a Johannesburg shopping center while we were in the country. (The man praised in the press as the hero of the bombing—a black security guard who was injured throwing an antibomb blanket over the mine just as it exploded—sounded off to the media a few days later. He was no hero, said the guard—he'd been ordered to do it by his white boss, who had fled the scene.)

It only takes a few days in South Africa to realize that the Western disinvestment campaign has not achieved much. More than 100 American firms have left the country. But the General Motors operation, for example, is now Delta Motors, thanks to a management buyout that leaves the company leaner-and-meaner than before—and still producing and marketing the same GM-designed Opels and other cars and trucks. "Delta Motors has made

a remarkable financial U-turn since it was bought out by local managers 18 months ago," read the tagline of a cover story in the August 1988 issue of *The Executive*, a glossy South African business magazine. Similarly, IBM-SA is now the locally owned ISM, and Unisys has just been bought by Datakor (partly owned by the giant Sanlam).

American brand names are everywhere, including those of firms that have not divested, such as Mobil and Kellogg's. In some cases, the divestiture is purely



On the wall outside an Anglican church in Soweto, we saw graffiti expressing the common reaction of South African blacks to sanctions.

cosmetic. Coca-Cola now sells its syrup to a firm in Swaziland—which turns around and supplies the same old locally owned bottlers in South Africa. So Coke "is it" everywhere you turn.

Kodak pulled out more systematically, but I was able to find Kodak film about half the places I looked, albeit rather high-priced (as was all film—Fuji and the others are making out very well from the cutback of Kodak products). And major multinational firms—Shell, Sanyo, Nissan, Mercedes, etc.—are continuing to do business as usual, making up for any shortages of U.S. products.

U.S.-imposed sanctions on South African products are another story, though. Zulu leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi says that sanctions such as those on South African coal have cost 210,000 black jobs. Since each black worker supports up to 12 family members, more than 2 million South African blacks may be worse off.

This could explain why nearly every poll on black attitudes toward sanctions, except those which word the question very generally, finds opposition. On the wall outside an Anglican church in Soweto we saw the graffiti "NO SANCTIONS, TUTU." John Kane-Berman of the South African Institute of Race Relations estimates that in the past two years, black support for sanctions has shrunk from one out of four to only one out of seven.

Unemployment is at 20 percent and climbing. While I didn't see any official crime figures, whites we visited in Johannesburg complain of a significant increase in burglary and other property crimes, which they attribute to increased black unemployment. And they said the home-security business is booming.

My reading of the political situation is that, in undermining the economy, sanctions play right into the hands of extremists at both ends of the political spectrum. The turn-back-the-clock right-wing Conservative Party has come from nowhere to be the official opposition, displacing the reform-minded Federal Progressive Party. A crippled economy and increasing crime and unrest could vault the CP into power, displacing the odious—but nonetheless definitely reformist—National Party of P. W. Botha. And the ANC and its allies on the left appear to be eager for a decline into chaos, from which they, too, hope to gain political power.

I left South Africa with a mixture of hope and anger. Hope that the dramatic and rapid changes of the past few years will continue, bringing urban blacks into the mainstream of economic life, giving them a stake in the system as a precondition of new political arrangements. And anger at the power of righteous ignorance in the United States—on college campuses, in corporate boardrooms, on the evening news, and in the halls of Congress.

A short visit to South Africa did not make me an expert, any more than it did Teddy Kennedy in 1985. But it did make me realize the great complexity of the situation there and the possibilities for a peaceful transition. My own conclusion is that the world should back off and give peace a chance.

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