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THE PARTING OF THE WAYS
by HERMANN GILIOMEER
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The cat is fain the fish to eat,
But hath no will to wet her feet.

Thus the popular press's verdict on P W Botha: as Professor Giliomeer puts it, "in part he seemed to sense the urgent need for reform and some kind of political settlement between white and black. But in another part he seemed just as determined as his predecessors to perpetuate policies that militate against any such settlement and just as prepared to quash or curtail anybody or anything that interfered with his management of the political system."

In this collection of essays in political journalism, Giliomeer moves beyond depicting Botha as the poor cat in the adage. In an analysis of South African politics and society between June 1976 and the split in the National Party, he shows that the Afrikaner leadership was forced to adopt a qualitatively different strategy of control: Vorster's *ad hoc* style of government was inherently incapable of managing the building crises of hegemony, economy and rationality after the Soweto revolt.

Giliomeer also shows, however, that the range of alternatives was severely restricted by the logic of ethnicity and the ponderous weight of the bureaucratic apparatuses. The crisis of Afrikanerdom is a crisis of structural contradictions: how to share power without losing control.

In tandem with this line of reasoning, Giliomeer deploys a parallel argument about the limited possibilities of authoritarian reform. In an essay entitled *The Limits of Reform from Above*, excerpted from a paper written for the Buthelezi Commission, he draws a comparison between South Africa and Czarist Russia. Giliomeer suggests that three factors militate against conservative reform. First, there is a strong tendency to view the needs and aspirations of blacks in narrow terms — housing, job security and so on. This tendency is exacerbated by the rise of managerial government: "in this sort of thinking and planning in Pretoria there is a dangerous tendency to see blacks as mere units in plans and models and greatly to underestimate the need blacks have for political influence and human fulfilment." Second, there is an absence of vehicles for the formulation and articulation of claims and grievances. As Giliomeer points out, this phenomenon is by no means confined to South Africa, but is endemic to the capitalist democracies: "the shift towards the executive is part of a universal trend almost inexorably pulling even great democracies in the direction of a deeply illiberal centralised state system."

Third, there is no overriding purpose or transcending value behind the process of authoritarian reform. P W Botha has spoken at length about universal Christianity, but he has failed to erase the impression of opportunism and expediency. The growing challenge to white hegemony has not been stemmed by the move to conservative reform, but has on the contrary gained strength. Giliomeer bleakly

summarises his assessment in a quotation from Burke: "there are critical moments in the fortunes of all states, when they who are unable to contribute to your prosperity may be strong enough to complete your ruin."

This is not to suggest, however, that *The Parting of the Ways* is solely concerned with the agonies of P W Botha. This collection includes essays on the lessons of Zimbabwe (in which Giliomeer makes the unconventional suggestion that the challenge to the state may emerge at its strongest in the rural areas), the prospects of a Namibian settlement (grim) and self-censorship in the press. There is also a long and somewhat tedious debate with South Africa's home-grown Friedmanniacs which does not move beyond the terrain of classical economics and which therefore ends on an inconclusive note.

Even so, P W Botha and the National Party dominate this collection. This is not surprising, since these essays were written as a running commentary as events unfolded. Surprisingly, however, there is little discussion of black opposition, except as an appendage to white politics. The ANC, in particular, is conspicuous by its absence; at times Giliomeer writes as if it can be bypassed and neutralised in reaching a South African settlement.

Despite the essential coherence of this collection, there are some extraordinary inconsistencies. At one point, for example, Giliomeer writes: "there is still the time as well as the undoubted capacity of whites and blacks to devise a rational political system which can accommodate large sections of both the white and black population. But as Abba Eban, Israeli minister for foreign affairs, once said: 'Men and nations turn to rationality only after they have exhausted all other alternatives.'" Yet 60 pages later, in engaging Stanley Greenberg's *Race and State in Capitalist Development*, Giliomeer attempts to disprove that "the élite . . . will in fact turn to rationality only after it has exhausted all alternatives."

In Giliomeer's defence, it must be added that he has declined to revise these essays for publication, "to retain something of the quality of hope and despair (the folly too!) of the contemporary observer of the period." Indeed, he makes no claims about *The Parting of the Ways*, beyond "the real point of re-publishing these essays is to convey something of how people felt about developments at the time they were happening." Professor Giliomeer is too modest. Whether or not he is justified in demarcating the time-span from mid 1976 to early 1982 as "a distinct period in South African history", this collection constitutes an incisive and penetrating analysis of the time, lacking nothing for having been written by and large for the popular press; indeed, as Stanley Uys says in the preface, "his contribution, too, is enhanced by the fact that through his newspaper writing he is able to convey his ideas to a wide audience." □