

Culture



Vincent CRAPANZANO, *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*, Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1985. 358 pages, \$27.50 (cloth)

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[See table of contents](#)

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Comptes rendus / Book Reviews

Vincent CRAPANZANO, *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*, Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1985. 358 pages, \$27.50 (cloth).

By Joanne Naiman
Ryerson Polytechnical Institute

Imagine the following scenario: It is 1943 and an anthropologist decides to study the personal dynamics of those who support fascism. He/she moves to a small village in the Black Forest, where, he/she gains the confidence of the inhabitants, who open up their hearts and innermost feelings. They describe how German culture is being weakened from within, their bitterness at being defeated in World War I, the "Jewish problem" in Germany, and the imminent threat of communism. The anthropologist returns from Germany, compiles the interviews into a book, and argues as his/her basic hypothesis that Hitler fascism stunts the personality and closes the mind, and that the German people are clearly as much victims of fascism as the millions being sent to the gas chambers. As social scientists, what would we make of such a book? Whatever the sincere intent of the author, could we in any way avoid seeing this book as an apology for fascism? As an avoidance of the real issues of that time and place? As a trivialization of the reality that was Germany under fascism?

While analogies are always somewhat flawed, the above scenario kept passing through my mind during my entire reading of Crapanzano's book. Why this book NOW, when the anti-apartheid struggle has exploded onto the front pages of every paper in North America, when the international community is increasingly threatening sanctions against South Africa, when the horrors of apartheid are reaching larger and larger numbers of the North American population? While the majority of Crapanzano's book is a direct reproduction of interviews with whites in "Wyndal", a small town in the Cape region of South Africa, the interviews are organized around his own central premise. As he says, "To be dominant in a system is not to dominate the system. Both the dominant and the dominated are *equally* caught in it." (p. 21, emphasis added).

To Crapanzano, apartheid has a psychological, philosophical basis, not an economic or political one. It is defined as "an extreme case of the Western

predisposition to classify and categorize just about everything in essentialist terms" (p. 20). The problem is reduced to that of different cultures living in a limited territory, with the Afrikaans culture under attack not only from the non-white population, but from the British oppressors as well. This is a theme which forms a central thread throughout the book.

It is not that the author ignores the political component of the apartheid system, but that he sees it as peripheral to the psychological dimension. Moreover, the political analysis he provides is highly questionable. Many controversial statements such as "opposition to apartheid tends to be fragmented and disorganized, and it is often symbolic" (p. XX), or "there is internal conflict in the ANC [African National Congress]" (p. XXI), are presented without adequate supportive evidence. Recent events inside South Africa cast strong doubts on the legitimacy of such statements.

The real essence of the apartheid system, of course, lies in the cheap black labour pool that it provides, to be used as they are needed and discarded in the bantustans when they are not. Over 2 million blacks have been forcibly moved to these cesspools of poverty and disease since 1948. Unemployment rates there range between 40% and 80%, and death from malnutrition claims as many as 50% of the children before the age of five. This is the reality that is apartheid, a system which the U.N. General Assembly has declared a "crime against humanity". The psychological consequences described by Crapanzano are of course the results of an ever-increasing repressive state apparatus and ideological justification required to maintain the system.

The methodology employed by the author raises many serious questions. Although the book is sub-titled "The Whites of South Africa", we have no way of knowing to what extent these interviews reflect the views of the majority of whites in South Africa, let alone others in the same town. We also have no way of knowing to what degree these interviews were edited; at minimum they have been organized and presented in such a way as to reinforce the author's arguments.

Moreover, a cursory examination of the bibliography reveals that most of the academic reference material used was written by white South Africans, the majority of whom could be labeled "apologists" for the apartheid system. Even the language used

by the author, his protests notwithstanding, portrays South Africa primarily from the white point of view. This can be seen in his consistent use of the term “riots” when referring to black uprisings such as those in Soweto in 1976—perhaps to reinforce his statement that opposition to apartheid is fragmented and disorganized.

That is not to say that the book is totally without value. There can be no doubt that a system as repressive as that in South Africa does psychological damage to *both* the black and white populations, and the book does provide a useful insight into both the distorted world views held by many whites in South Africa and the ways in which their ideas are created and maintained. However, these are the *consequences*, not the *causes* of apartheid. In this sense the people interviewed may be seen as victims of the system. But Crapanzano’s analysis does not deal with the structures of power, and hence there are no major or minor players. Because he ignores this crucial variable, he does not see that the people of “Wyndal” are neither the major victims of apartheid, nor are they its major perpetrators. It is no wonder, then, that they are “waiting”—they have neither the desire to change the system, nor the power to maintain it.

The dust cover of the book tells us that the author has recreated social reality for us “as a novelist might...” The book may be many things, but it is not credible social science. Its questionable methodology, its inadequate analysis, and its highly selective source material do not stand up to the rigours of science. But even more troubling is what the book does to the reader. Not one of us can read this book without being just a little more sympathetic to the justifications for apartheid which run through the book. After all, these people of “Wyndal” are basically nice, ordinary people, *just like you and me*. In the end we are left with the feeling that a solution to the problems of South Africa is not as simple as it might at first seem. Surely it is no accident that the author selected for his last interview “Dora Herzog” telling us that all the blacks want to do is kill whites, and that “it’s the communists” causing unrest inside South Africa. Is my opening analogy really that far from the truth?

William M. MANDEL, *Soviet But Not Russian — The ‘Other’ Peoples of the Soviet Union*, Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, & Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1985. 375 pages, \$13.50 (*paper*), \$24.95 (*cloth*).

By Peter Smollett
University of Regina

I often show my classes a lovely short film on the work of an Uzbek plaster carver, Mirmachmud Usmanov from Soviet Uzbekistan. I patiently explain to my students that the Uzbeks are an Asian people in the Soviet Union who are very different from Russians. Later in one semester, a student wrote: “Russians who live in Asia are called Uzbeks.” Oh well, one tries.

The USSR is a multi-national federated state of fifteen distinct nations. In addition, there are dozens of other ethnic groups and sub-groups with varying levels of autonomous governmental structures. Russia is geographically and by population the largest of the fifteen. The other fourteen are not only decidedly non-Russian, only two of them — Byelorussia and the Ukraine — are Slavic. William M. Mandel’s book is an historical, political, social, ethnographic survey of these “other” peoples.

Mandel has been researching, writing and lecturing about the Soviet Union for nearly half a century. He began his career as an economic geographer, but in recent years has considered cultural anthropology to be his guiding discipline. His new book, like his earlier *SOVIET WOMEN*, benefits greatly from his familiarity with Soviet social science research. For twenty years, until his retirement in 1982, he was the translator of six Soviet quarterly scholarly journals, including *SOVIET ANTHROPOLOGY AND ARCHAEOLOGY* and *SOVIET SOCIOLOGY*.

Much of the book’s content is based on Mandel’s own observations in the USSR, including his observations of changes he has seen on some ten extended visits going back to the year he spent there as a student in the early thirties. Mandel travels with a tape recorder and uses it extensively and informally. The book is peppered with life histories — some fragments, some quite substantial.

Mandel’s book is testimony to the success of Soviet nationalities policy. The only former colonial empire which remains to a large extent politically intact today is the old Russian empire. From the Czarist “prison house of nations”, the Soviets have created a new kind of free association of interdependent nations.