

Africa's changing economic relations with China, Japan and South Korea. Both Chapter 16 and 17 point to historical relations between *apartheid* South Africa and Japan and Israel, although relations waned with Israel yet economic diplomacy has seen relations between South Africa and Japan continue, despite losing some ground to China. The figures, however, confirm the ongoing inequality of trade between Africa and north-east Asia with a continued focus in extracting Africa's natural resources. Following on from these analyses Justine van der Merwe's contribution (Chapter 18) seems a little vague on foreign policy and South Africa's international engagement linked to the proposed Government-Business-Media complex. The value of the complex as a framework for analysis is also not clear, particularly as each sector includes a diversity of players.

In the final chapter by Mopeli Mosheshoe (Chapter 19) the focus is placed on understanding South Africa's leadership role within the region, or the idea of South African as a hegemon, "reluctant" or not. Given the challenges already presented in the previous chapters of this volume it is little wonder that the chapter's analysis concludes that it is South Africa's "internal constraints that limit its leadership ability in Southern Africa" (p 361).

With a number of publications being released in 2014 considering the progress of South Africa over the course of the first two decades of democracy this edited volume should be included on the reading list of academics, researchers, students and government officials looking to engage in the debate on South Africa's achievements and disappointments in shaping the future of the country.

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**Praeg, Leonhard, *A Report on Ubuntu*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press 2014, 305 pp.**

The term 'community' has gained in prominence in contemporary public political discourse. It has become a favourite in the speeches of politicians who use it to invoke a deeper moral commitment from their followers and the public at large. 'Community' thus often makes its way into the discourse for purely instrumental purposes only very loosely associated with its substantive contributions to political understanding and social engagement. Its inclusion through phrases such as 'community focused', and 'to work for the community' is intended by the politician as a veiled critique or question-

ing of myopic and selfish trends in her society. The appeal thereof as a rhetorical device is that it allows for her to be critical without sounding prescriptive, for who is against community? The almost automatic sentimentality and vagueness of the term makes it an ideal device for a politician who wants to reflect a deep morality without appearing dogmatic and preachy.

A similar fate seems to have befallen '*Ubuntu*' in South Africa. The manner in which it is employed within the South African political landscape more often than not reflects such a sentimentalisation. It would be a mistake, however, to ascribe this to being but a reflection of the moralising phraseology of our politicians, bureaucrats, and others on the public stage. Leonhard Praeg in his newly released book contends that it signifies but the latest iteration in an ongoing and highly political contestation of ideas, between Western modernity axiomatically posited on individual autonomy, and a tradition of thought critical of it.

Praeg's work is a deep engagement with the fundamental political nature of the discourse which has always surrounded *Ubuntu*. This is made evident right at the outset of his work with the rather peculiar title, *A Report on Ubuntu*. By means of this title he links the study to the act of reporting, as in the giving of an account of oneself, and more specifically then to the notion of responsibility. He argues, drawing on the ideas of Derrida, that as academics we always have the responsibility of "articulating and making visible the politics that is constantly reproduced in and through our institutions of higher learning" (p 3). In a similar vein, this book, as a report on *Ubuntu*, thus reflects an endeavour to make visible and engage with the politics that shape our use and understanding of the concept. He makes it clear that any broad engagement with *Ubuntu* as a philosophy about our shared humanity "in its articulation as first and foremost a political act, cannot but amount to or imply a confrontation with the measures and mechanisms that historically excluded it as a sign of primitiveness, only to reappropriate it later as a messianic signifier of our shared humanity" (p 15).

For the purpose of this report Praeg chooses to loosen *Ubuntu* from narrow nationalist considerations and to rather position it more broadly as a form of 'critical humanism', the most important feature of which is an awareness of, and engagement with, exactly the primacy of the political, especially relations of power. Secondly, such a critical humanism makes it clear that *Ubuntu* must be approached as a mode of critique, and not, in and of itself, as an ideology, or a full-blown alternative to Western political and philosophical forms. It remains rather a 'praxis of humanising' that resists the reductions and closing-downs of dominant

systems of thought, thus helping us to recapture the promise of the future, and to open up the horizons of such a future. For Praeg, engaging with *Ubuntu* under the rubric of critical humanism leads thirdly to a consideration of philosophical anthropology which entails a re-opening of our minds to the meaning of humanity. This constitutes the focus of his first two chapters, the first of which considers the anthropology implied by *Ubuntu's* view on being human and on belonging, while the second reflects on the existing literature on *Ubuntu*, that is, on the way in which those who write about it, think about it. This then leads him to consideration of the sociology, and maybe more to the point, the politics of knowledge which undergirds how we conceptualise *Ubuntu*. The focus of this second chapter on the politics at play in knowledge production stands at the heart of this whole study and leads him to conclude that engagement with *Ubuntu* provides an opportunity for grappling with the limitations and promise of modernity, and as an occasion to 'talk back' to the specific dominant narrative of liberal democratic modernity. Such a critical praxis becomes evident in the remaining and final three chapters.

Chapter three considers one historical attempt at converting *Ubuntu* into an ideology, namely Nyerere's Ujamaa project, while the last two chapters turn to consider the emancipatory potential of *Ubuntu* in South African law where the diverse understandings of belonging can lead to very different conceptions of justice.

Praeg's book, which makes up the first part of the Thinking Africa Series,<sup>1)</sup> is a serious academic intervention in the discourse surrounding *Ubuntu*. This work endeavours to rescue *Ubuntu* from the fate of being turned into a mere nonsense when used only as a rhetorical plaything. It aims to remind and demonstrate to us the emancipatory potential actually contained in *Ubuntu*, mainly in the way it can aid in the opening and liberation of our minds from the perceived dogmas of our time.

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## Endnotes

1. The second being *Ubuntu: Curating the Archive*.

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