Research Africa Reviews Vol. 8 No. 3, December 2024

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Neil Roos, *Ordinary Whites in Apartheid Society: Social Histories of Accommodation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press and Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9781776148905 (Wits).

Reviewed by: Kathryn Mathers, Duke University.

The first and last time I saw Neill Blomkamp's film, *District 9* (2009), was when it was just released. Despite finding it compelling and disruptive, I have not managed to rewatch it. The opening faux documentary scene of a friendly, determined bureaucrat diligently marking off a form that decides the extermination of living creatures was such a stark representation of Apartheid bureaucratic banality that it made me viscerally ill. Neil Roos' *Ordinary Whites in South Africa* gives a similar glimpse into the ordinariness of everyday violence in an oppressive society. It is no surprise that he is drawn to Hannah Arendt's work on the banality of violence to try to understand how white South Africans accommodated and were complicit in the apartheid regime's racist systems.

This history of state social interventions in the lives of white South Africans between the 1940s and 1950s asks how that complicity worked alongside small resistances, defiance, and refusals by working-class whites. It is this tension laid out through thick archival research that reveals the workings and ideologies behind state social programs to fix the problem of white poverty and white delinquency that makes this text a provocative and generative read.

As I read the book in Trump's United States, it is hard to imagine a better time to try to understand how working-class whites might aspire to belonging in a white supremacy while resisting some of its expectations of who and what they should be. Roos begins with an overview of how South African history has represented whites, frustrated by the lack of attention to white lives, especially ordinary ones, but also to the connections between whites and the Black South Africans that are rightly at the forefront of academic work on 20th-century South African history.

Chapter 3, ‘The Delicacy of Teacups,’ grounds the text in a history of the first few decades of the twentieth century as fears about urbanization and white poverty dominated global conversations about South Africa. Chapter 4, ‘Insluipers, Geoffrey Cronje, and Social Policy,’ really begins the book's close reading of how thinkers within and outside the government, like Geoffrey Cronje, were able to initiate state systems with a very specific idea of what the nation should be and who it should include. Chapters 5 and 6 take us deeply into the workings of the apartheid regime's Public Service, the use of employment to get whites out of poverty, the need for larger bureaucracies, and the tensions of having to employ women in contradiction to the ideological construct of the *volksmoeder* (mother of the nation). Chapters 7 and 8 reveal the work the state had to do to maintain its imagined white (civilized) society, policing consumption while also encouraging it and hiding white delinquency in the ironically named (perhaps not) work colonies for white men.

Another generative element of the text, subtle though it is, is the global perspective throughout. This South African social history positions disputes about poverty, gender and correct roles for women, alcoholism, and ways to combat it within debates taking place in the USA and Europe, resisting the often isolationist or exceptionalism often applied to understanding South African social formations. I appreciate very much David Roediger’s work on whiteness in the US (he also wrote the ‘foreword’ to this edition), but though it is rare, I expected some engagement with the sociology and history of whiteness in South Africa by South Africans like Melissa Steyn and Roger Southall.

One of the tensions of taking whiteness seriously in understanding apartheid is that it can lead to class reductionism, a resistance to racialization and racism as the driving ideology of the system. *Ordinary Whites in Apartheid Society* shows how the continuity and logic of the apartheid system’s controlling processes can seem primarily concerned with class but also makes clear the ways these processes are always ultimately about race. The personal familial stories and rich archive of state documents and memos, debates and letters, magazines and advertisements show the clear mobilization by the state of ideas about class and proper modern, civilized behavior that drove their policies and programs. But, and this is an exciting turn that I wish were more explicit, the words and fears expressed by apartheid’s social engineers make it very clear that what they really care about is whiteness.

I read *Ordinary Whites in Apartheid Society* wondering if my own mother and aunts would have been those 'railway children' Roos was forbidden to play with. I grew up visiting my grandparents in their railway house on the southern suburbs line in Cape Town, and so I am drawn to Roos' use of family history and personal anecdotes to ground his archival work in the personal and the specific. But I am confused by the description of this work as ethnographic, an odd naming for this anthropologist. Does it mean simply attention to the personal, the everyday, narrative or storytelling?

These family anecdotes are generative and render the archival history much more compelling. But they are really just another archive of family stories (perhaps tracked down and sourced), family photographs, and memories. An archive that not only brings the dry memos and policy papers of state apparatuses alive, but also brings us (especially us white South Africans) into these sites of accommodation.

I, like Roos, would push against any claims from my family or from myself that we were not implicated in apartheid's violence, a foundational frustration of this book. In insisting that we understand just how the South African state surveilled, managed, and controlled what it meant to be white and especially Afrikaner, Roos has to walk a difficult line between taking seriously the ways apartheid was a repressive regime for whites, especially for women, and just how much privilege and protection it provided white people.

Yet in some ways, his own work suggests that it might be possible to not just understand how whites were made by this system but how power works for everyone in an authoritarian regime. His histories of ordinary white society reveal a remarkable continuity between the ideological systems used to control white behavior and those used to control Black South Africans. His interventions make clear, however, that mechanisms and structures used for the former must not even be compared to the violence enacted on Black South Africans. *Ordinary Whites in Apartheid Society* indeed reveals that white working-class South Africans did little to nothing to confront and acknowledge, let alone fight against apartheid's treatment of Black South Africans. But he also uncovers the mechanism by which they were violated by it in ways that might just explain why they felt and claimed to feel untethered to the apartheid system.

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Research Africa

ISSN 2575-6990.