

## BOOK REVIEW

Faeza Ballim. *Apartheid's Leviathan: Electricity and the Power of Technological Ambivalence*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2023. x + 167 pp. Map. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$32.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780821425183.

In *Apartheid's Leviathan*, Faeza Ballim explores the relationship between South Africa's state-owned enterprises and the various governments with which they have interacted over the past 100 years, stretching from the early period of unification, through segregation, apartheid, and into the democratic era of the twenty-first century. In particular, she is interested in how these entities—technological enterprises—survived, prospered, and transformed themselves according to, or in some cases in spite of, the political dictates of the relevant political regimes. In particular, she argues that while the political and the technological are inextricably bound together, the complexity of technological operations made it difficult for politicians to effectively control these enterprises, leaving the engineers and technocrats to forge their own policies.

The six substantive chapters of *Apartheid's Leviathan* present a historical narrative which neatly divides into chronological as well as topical essays on the development of the state corporations in the overall context of South African history. The focus is on one project initiated in the Waterberg area of the Limpopo province in South Africa at the behest of the government's steel enterprise—the South African Iron and Steel Corporation (Iskor)—in order to ensure the profitability of its Grootgeluk coal mine, thereby bringing in the Electricity Supply Commission (Eskom) as a customer. In Chapter One, Ballim describes Iskor's financial problems and its need to pay off considerable loans as part of the justification to expand operations in conjunction with Eskom. In Chapter Two, "The Taming of the Waterberg," Ballim follows the establishment of the mine and the power station and the impact of the two state corporations on the local town, Ellisras, now known as Lephalale. In one of the most interesting parts of the story, she describes the negotiations over where and how the African workers, so central to both operations, should be housed in this small rural town, honoring the dictates of apartheid policies, maintaining control over workers, and placating the white town residents. She returns to concern over workers' rights in Chapter Five, when African unions began to pressure Eskom for better housing and equal pay beginning in the 1970s. By the mid-1990s, workers had gained rights to better housing, thanks to the policies of the postapartheid government. The book also offers a careful examination of some of the technical issues involved with the establishment of the Matimba and Medupi power stations in Lephalale, and a discussion of the corruption which has


created a crisis of service for Eskom in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The book is carefully researched and well written, giving readers a clear understanding of the issues at stake in Lephalale. Although she lays out the current academic discourse regarding the state and technology in her Introduction, the longest chapter in the book, Ballim does not sacrifice clarity for theorizing, providing her readers with a readable narrative and leaning into her archival sources to prove her analysis. Ballim has scoured the national archives as well as Eskom's own archives and has made good use of contemporary news accounts of the corporations. Of special interest, she used the files of the Ministerial Committee on Privatization and Deregulation in operation in the late 1980s, which weighed the success or failure of existing state enterprises. And the author includes valuable insights on the operations of the corporations from interviews with former employees, as well as residents of Lephalale and workers at Eskom. For those who are unfamiliar with South Africa's early industrial history and the background of the state corporations, Ballim provides an accessible introduction to this history.

Nevertheless, there are several questions that remain unanswered and, in some cases, not even posed. For example, Ballim starts with the relationship between Iscor and Eskom, the two state entities working together, and yet there is no discussion of Iscor past the second chapter other than a brief paragraph noting its privatization in 1989. What happened to the ownership of the Grootgeluk coal mine, and how did that affect the Eskom power stations? One assumes that the mine became part of the private Arcelor Mittal steel company which bought out Iscor; how did that affect the prices Eskom paid for coal? The issues surrounding the decision to sell off Iscor while retaining Eskom are discussed briefly, but a clearer distinction could be made between the one, a producer of steel, and the other, a service industry fundamental to all facets of the economy. Further, there is no discussion of the state corporations' business dealings with private enterprise or finance, relationships which had proved crucial throughout their earlier history (Anglo American provided the capital for Eskom to buy out private electricity companies in 1948). In the postapartheid period, private capital and finance have shied away from such investments and in the case of Iscor engaged in outright asset stripping. And although Ballim argues that Eskom has proven successful in navigating the changing political landscape, what of the impact of postapartheid changes in South African society? In particular, Eskom now faces a vastly expanded consumer market for electricity and rising labor costs as compared with apartheid-era restrictions on African housing and wages. A comparison between labor costs in apartheid and postapartheid South Africa would have been useful, as well as the changing balance between residential and industrial sales. While focusing on the technological issues governing the operation of these entities as opposed to the political pressure from government is useful, there is little explanation of the economic factors which also play a major role in their success or failure.

Faeza Ballim has produced a carefully researched and well-written case study of Eskom's situation through a period of dramatic change in South Africa. The tension between the technological dictates of electricity generation and the

ideological goals of successive governments is examined through the history of these two power stations, Matimba and Medupi. It is unclear, however, if this specific case is representative enough to carry the weight of the analysis or whether it stands simply on its own. Can we say that Eskom successfully navigated the space between technology and politics when we witness its current failures? Certainly Iscor, overtaken by global capital and currently exporting more coal than it produces steel, did not. Perhaps rather than a leviathan—a creature of immense power, “nothing on earth is its equal” (Job 41:33)—Eskom has survived rather as a chameleon, capable of sudden and significant change to protect itself while remaining vulnerable to the greater forces of politics and economics.

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