

REVIEW OF THE WORLD AND SA IN THE 1990'S - CLEM SUNTER

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I have the advantage of having both listened to and read Sunter on the same topic : The World and SA in the 1990's .

To hear him is more exciting than to read him. Not that he writes badly, or uninterestingly, on the contrary. But a verbal experience of scenario building is always more compelling than quietly and carefully reading about it. Then all those careful qualifications and methodological pre-conditions impose themselves on one's consciousness and one is constantly reminded that the "ifs" and "buts" rob the speculations and options of much of their glamour.

Nevertheless, it is still important to read this book, for a number of reasons. One of them is that it places South Africa in a global context and shows how international political, economic and technological trends are bound to affect us. With the prevailing myopic arrogance which emanates from those who govern, which would have it that they are not only completely in charge of our own destiny, but almost of the whole world, this is a healthy perspective. Also important is the perspective that our domestic course need not be a foregone conclusion; that we are not completely delivered unto inevitable historical forces. We have options. We can still choose to save or destroy our country.

The analytical framework for both the global and domestic "scenarios" (terrible word), is straightforward and simple. Having carefully emphasized the difference between forecasting and scenario-building, stated points of departure and primordial assumptions, Sunter formulates his (a) "rules of the game" (i.e. operating assumptions for the world and South Africa)' (b) identifies "key actors" (globally : USA, Japan, USSR; domestically : SA government and those who oppose it); and (c) relates "key or pivotal uncertainties" to the inter-relationships between the key actors. Globally, the "uncertainties" concern whether there will be an escalating trade war between USA and Japan or not, and/or whether there will be an escalating arms race between USA and USSR or not. These uncertainties bifurcate into 4 scenarios for "the world" and the impact of each of them shape certain options for the major and minor players in the global arena. Similarly, key uncertainties on the domestic level are "strategies of power" for the different parties in the South African conflict; secondly, economic

strategy and thirdly the relationship between South Africa and the world. Given the possible relationships between these uncertainties, Sunter identifies two scenarios for South Africa : The High Road which involves "minimal sanctions, small government, decentralized power and joint negotiation", and the Low Road "increasing sanctions, controlled economy, centralized government and eventual confrontation and conflict."

I found the global analysis much more fascinating, perhaps because it is unfamiliar and full of fascinating information and new insights. Obviously Sunter does not expect us to take the global actors and their "pivotal uncertainties" too dogmatically seriously, but once one accepts his choice of them, the scenarios develop a plausibility of their own and one plays along in spinning out additional possibilities. This, after all, is one of the main purposes of the book and it certainly succeeds in this respect.

However, the domestic analyses did not follow through on the same level of excitement. There is nothing really fresh in saying that South Africa faces the consequences of co-optive or negotiation politics. In fact, this conclusion can be reached by following a number of different routes of analysis and bears no tight logical relationship to Sunter's analytical framework. Also, to simply divide the "key actors" in South Africa into the Government and those who oppose it is just too gross and clumsy. Opposition groups stand in different relationships towards government and towards each other and choices made by government affect them differently. Does one simply dismiss co-optive strategies out of hand? Shouldn't one consider the dynamics and contradictions of co-option as well? After all, the whole union movement is an example of where co-optive structures were used for goals unintended by those who created them.

What I felt particularly amiss was the old problem of scenario building and that is the focus on content and the neglect of process. Once we know what the High Road and Low Road look like, we still have to get to the one and avoid the other. Some of this "process" advice is implicit in the analyses, but we are urgently in need of spelling out more concretely the steps that have to be taken to "get on the road". We are nowhere near the negotiation option in South Africa at present. What must be done to build the climate for it to become a probable rather than a possible one?

These are not fundamental criticisms. In fact, if one understands Sunter's framework, he cannot but welcome them. One of the merits of this kind of analysis is the manner in which it pin points its own shortcomings and forces one to ask for more.