Critics of liberalism in Europe and North America argue that a stress on ‘rights talk’ and identity politics has led to fragmentation, individualisation and depoliticisation. But are these developments really signs of ‘the end of politics’?

Steven L. Robins argues for the continued importance of NGOs, social movements and other ‘civil society’ actors in creating new forms of citizenship and democracy, producing a complex, hybrid and ambiguous relationship between civil society and the state, where new negotiations around citizenship emerge.

“What becomes of popular politics in post-revolutionary times, when liberation meets liberalization, and struggles against colonial inequality give way to a rhetoric of rights? In this provocative, richly-illustrated book, one of South Africa’s most thoughtful scholars probes the everyday meaning of “rights talk”, “citizenship” and cultural identity. Contrary to critics who see these developments as merely a retreat from collective action into a politics of individual self-interest, Robins argues that ordinary South Africans are skilled at straddling the multiple languages offered by the state, social movements, and other sources of Power. His enlightening ethnographic examples make it plain that post-apartheid politics continues a long tradition of ‘creative improvisation’; that it manages to combine the language of rights with an enduring investment in communal forms of belonging.” — Jean Comaroff, University of Chicago

“…an important book, setting out as it does a strong argument for rejecting some of the more cynical analyses suggesting an “end of politics”. Based on some rich empirical case studies it offers some fascinating insights into the post-apartheid dilemmas in South Africa.” — Ian Scoones, IDS, University of Sussex

Steven L. Robins is Professor of Social Anthropology in the University of Stellenbosch and editor of Limits to Liberation after Apartheid (James Currey).


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James Currey

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