
Introduction: The Changing History of South Africa

In the late twentieth century South Africa was much in the public eye. Events such as the Soweto uprising of 1976, the virtual civil war of the 1980s, the collapse of apartheid and the 'small miracle' (in Nelson Mandela's words) of a peaceful transition to democracy in the 1990s brought widespread attention to a country whose policies of legislated racial discrimination had made it an anomaly in the post-colonial world. South Africa 'has ignited international passions in a way that few nations in recent history have managed' (Andrews 2007: 148).

Over the same period, the study of South Africa's past mushroomed. Many new academic works appeared from the mid-1970s and university courses on South African history were offered widely in Europe, the United States and Africa. Not only did the volume of scholarship increase: its general findings significantly transformed our understanding of the making of modern South Africa in a process which 'in historiographical terms represents a revolution' (Smith 1988). Although something of the ferment in historical writing of those decades has now passed, new work is constantly appearing and South African history continues to be an engaging field for students.

This book attempts to introduce readers to some of this historical scholarship. It may be read as a self-contained work, although it is not a complete general history of South Africa, and the reader may choose to supplement it with one of the several good recent overviews on the market (see general surveys, p. 170). Although it ranges from the pre-colonial period to the

present, its central focus is on the years between the 1910s and the 1970s, when racial segregation was paramount. The book also examines the decline and final collapse of apartheid in the 1980s and 1990s, and ends with an overview of some of the key issues in a 'new South Africa' attempting to recover from its traumatic past.

To understand how the themes of more recent writing on South African history emerged, we need to say something briefly about the prevailing views that preceded it.

The earliest histories of South Africa were mainly concerned with its white inhabitants. It is true that writings by missionaries, administrators and black intellectuals such as Sol Plaatje and Tiyo Soga in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did pay attention to the experience of black communities, but these did not find their way into the mainstream of historical scholarship (Hamilton, Mbenga and Ross 2010: 23–5). Afrikaner nationalist writers tended instead to laud the achievements of the trekkers and their descendants, while English-speaking historians placed emphasis on the role of the British government and settlers. Indigenous South Africans played only a background role in these versions of the past. As in Europe, many histories written in the early twentieth century emphasized political events and the 'making of the nation-state'. Such approaches pervaded many academic texts and syllabi in South Africa until the early 1980s (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000 and, for example of such a text, Muller 1975).

But by the middle of the century the inadequacy of such an approach was already apparent. Clearly the key issue in South Africa was racial discrimination and the causes of systematic segregation. Historians of liberal sympathies began to explore these issues, emphasizing the economic and social background to segregation and apartheid (Saunders 1988). Despite diversity, most of these writers viewed South Africa as a 'dual economy' with two distinct societies: a white urban and capitalist agrarian system on the one hand and a rural impoverished and stagnating African sector on the other. Apartheid was explained by the unhappy history of a virulent racism, primarily of Afrikaners, which was born on the frontier of the early Cape colony and transported inland by the Great Trek to resurface in the catastrophic National Party victory of 1948. Such arguments were the mainstay of the authoritative *Oxford History of South Africa* published in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Wilson and Thompson 1971).

The *Oxford History* also foreshadowed changes in historical approach of a more fundamental nature. It was influenced by the emergence of African

history as a sub-discipline in its own right in the late 1960s and 1970s. In response to the independence of Africa from colonialism a body of scholarship now focused on the internal operation of African societies, rather than seeing them as adjuncts to colonial policies. It was no longer possible to view South African history as the story of British and Afrikaner settlers and their conflicts.

But the South African 'historiographical revolution' went further than this. Indeed, the *Oxford History* was criticized soon after its publication by a new group of young historians, many of them South Africans studying abroad, who were influenced by a neo-Marxist, or revisionist, paradigm. They explained apartheid not by the irrational racism of a pre-industrial colonial frontier, but as the direct product of South Africa's unique process of industrialization. Segregation, so argued the revisionists, was specifically developed to nurture early industry, particularly mining, and capitalist agriculture. Contrary to the 'dual economy' notion of the liberals, revisionists saw the poverty and deprivation of many Africans as an integral part of the South African industrial system. Cheap labor was the basis of this economy, and it explained much of the growth and dynamics of modern South Africa. In this argument segregation and apartheid resulted from class domination by capitalists rather than broad race domination by whites.

These approaches transformed understanding of the South African past. The focus now lay on early industrialization on the Rand after the 1880s rather than on the societies of the pre-industrial trekker republics and British colonies in the early nineteenth century. The nature of specific class formations in differing periods and regions came to be identified, showing that not all whites or all Africans underwent the same experiences. For instance, Afrikaner nationalism had to be consciously created in the 1930s as a means of bringing together diverse class interests. And a vibrant African peasant sector in the late nineteenth century was identified, initially responding to new market opportunities but then being destroyed by the competing needs of white farmers and urban employers for labor.

A leading figure in this development was Shula Marks, a London-based South African historian, who trained a generation of scholars, many of them South Africans who took up academic posts in liberal English-speaking universities in the country in the 1980s. Three collections of work produced out of her London seminars became seminal texts (Marks and Atmore 1980; Marks and Rathbone 1982; Marks and Trapido 1987). Debates between the 'liberal' and 'radical' historians were heated and relics

of them still continue (Lipton 2007). However, by the late 1980s and 1990s the consensus of a new generation of South African academic historians was that the revisionist interpretations had triumphed (Stolten 2007: 20–23). A key role in this was played by the History Workshop movement based at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Founded in 1977, in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising, its focus was the recovery of the experiences and agency of ordinary men and women in the past, a direction which clearly spoke to the popular struggles of the late apartheid era in which the Workshop operated.

Since then some of the dogmatism of the early revisionist writers has been tempered. For example the migrant labor system, which was developed to the profit of the mining industry, has now been shown to have poorly served the needs of manufacturing: segregation did not suit all capitalists (Feinstein 2005). Following trends in historical writing elsewhere, and led by the History Workshop historians, the uncompromising structuralism of Marxist argument has given way to a more nuanced version, in which individual and community experiences hold prime place and the diversity of response is recognized. Economic exploitation still left space for cultural autonomy. Much use has been made of oral history as a means of recovering such experiences. One of the most acclaimed South African historical books of the 1990s was the life history of an illiterate sharecropper, Kas Maine, based on a series of oral interviews (Van Onselen 1996). His experiences challenge the crude generalizations of historians by showing a complex and subtle defiance to the economic and political onslaught on black cultivators that lasted throughout most of the twentieth century.

The ending of apartheid has not yet produced a new version of national history akin to those that emerged in many post-colonial countries. Although Black Consciousness intellectuals such as Steve Biko called for the re-writing of South African history from an Africanist perspective, this has only taken place to a limited extent (Hamilton, Mbenga and Ross 2010: 51–2). A key reason for this is that the post-apartheid government consciously sought to be reconciliatory and inclusive rather than to promote an exclusively Africanist version of the South African past. There are evident difficulties in constructing a single national history out of such a divided past, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission discovered (Andrews 2007: 174). Moreover, the revisionist revolution in South African historiography had already focused attention on the experiences and resistance of ordinary men and women in the past and this accorded well with the

ideals of the newly democratic ANC government. In these circumstances there was no perceived need for another major paradigm shift after 1994.

Well established fields of scholarship which placed less emphasis on the national arena, such as urban and local histories, continued to be productive (Bickford-Smith 2008; Nieftagodien 2010). New interpretations also emerged which challenged the remaining vestiges of settler histories. For example Etherington (2001) made an influential case for viewing the nineteenth century history of the region from the Highveld rather than the settler Cape, arguing that the 'great trek' of Afrikaners in the 1830s should be viewed as an integral part of a much wider process of social and demographic change.

Other developments within revisionist interpretations that reflect international trends became more significant in the 1990s. The most striking is a growing recognition of the importance of gender. A call for the recognition of gender as a category of historical analysis was made in the 1980s (Bozzoli 1983; Walker 1990), but it is only in the post-apartheid era that earlier tendencies to see race or class in generalized terms has given way to a greater understanding of differentiated gendered experiences within such categories. This was aided by the constitutional removal in 1996 of discrimination not only on the grounds of race but also of gender and sexuality. Analysis of the way in which both male and female South Africans have constructed their identities in gendered terms has now greatly influenced our understanding of a wide range of historical topics, including slavery, migrant labor, the South African war, urbanization, Afrikaner nationalism, peasant farming and popular resistance (Bradford 1996; Morrell 1998).

Another new area of study was environmental history, the analysis of changing relationships between people and their environment over time. Particular foci of this work have been changing hunting and farming practices, the impact of settler societies on the landscape, especially in relation to forestry, changing technology and its effect on agricultural land, and the politics of conservation policies (Beinart and Coates 1995).

However there is no doubt that the fervor of South African historical writing of the 1980s has abated, leading some scholars to lament a 'disquieting – even demoralizing' decline (Bundy 2007: 74). The Witwatersrand History Workshop, a pivot of radical scholarship, became notably less influential (Bonner 2010). Radical social history was on the retreat (Cobley 2001). It was ironic that at a time when the political goals of many revisionist South African historians had been achieved, their academic writing became less influential. For a while in the new millennium even the study

of history altogether in South African schools and colleges came under threat (Nuttall and Wright 2000, du Toit 2010). Some have attributed this to the predominant need within contemporary South Africa to look forward to a new future rather than back to a divisive past. However without a historical perspective, as ANC education minister Kader Asmal pointed out in 2004, there can be little understanding of the challenges that exist within the new nation (Asmal 2004).

Some of this perceived crisis was also the response of social historians to new historiographical developments that have taken place internationally and are now becoming more evident in South Africa. The 'cultural turn' in history has shifted the focus to an examination of the ways in which people in the past constructed particular identities and self-perceptions and how they expressed this in their everyday lives, a theme which perhaps finds greater resonance in the post-apartheid era than class mobilization and popular resistance. A path-breaking study in this regard was that of Jean and John Comaroff who explored new forms of consciousness amongst both colonizer and colonized in the nineteenth century Highveld (1991). Crais (2002) demonstrated with anthropological insight the significance of understandings of concepts of good and evil in explaining African and colonial concepts of power and resistance in the nineteenth century eastern Cape, concepts which extended into the apartheid era. Continuities between forms of consciousness and political mobilization in the nineteenth and early twentieth century highveld challenge the pre-industrial / industrial chronological divide of earlier revisionist scholarship (Landau 2010a). Analysis of constructions of self-identity has overtaken that of class in recent work on the colonial Cape in the eighteenth century (Mitchell and Groenewald 2010). As a result there has been something of a loss of an overall 'connective tissue' to replace the neo-Marxist frame of reference of earlier work (Posel 2010).

Perhaps a more serious threat to the ideas of the revisionist social historians comes from the 'textual' or 'linguistic' turn. This demands a focus on the construction of texts, both of sources used by historians and those they themselves produce, and the inability of such texts to convey a real past. For example, a critique has emerged of the tendency of some revisionist oral historians, such as Van Onselen's study of Kas Maine, to mine evidence for its factual content to the neglect of issues of memory and discourse (Minkley and Rassool 1998). The nature of the archive, so often constructed within colonial paradigms, and ways of engaging with it on a more complex level than that of mining it for empirical information, has

come under close scrutiny (Hamilton 2002). Some writers have gone further and accused the social history revisionists of perpetuating colonialist power relations by which the academic historian speaks for the colonized: the postcolonial moment in South African history production has still to arrive (Lalu 2009; Rassool 2010). There have been key studies of the way in which particular histories have been constructed in the past, although most historians would still argue that there are limits to the degree to which it can be completely 'invented' (Bank 2006; Hofmeyr 1993; Hamilton 1998; Rutledge 2011; Wylie 2000). These cultural and textual trends are now becoming much more evident and are partially reflected in the pages of the latest authoritative general history, the *Cambridge History of South Africa* (Hamilton, Mbenga and Ross 2010; Ross, Mager and Nasson, 2011). It remains to be seen whether these volumes will date as rapidly in the face of new paradigms as did the *Oxford History* in the 1970s.

These are certainly signs of a new vibrancy in scholarship but they do not always communicate easily in a society which seeks truths and certainties from its historians. Some academic historians have instead turned to examining heritage, or the public representations of the past in the present, usually to critically analyze how the new South African state has changed the ways in which history is commemorated (Coombes, 2004; Nuttall and Coetzee 1998), although most combine detailed historical research with such analysis (Crais and Scully 2009; Maylam 2005; Witz 2003). Rassool has argued that heritage, rather than the academy, has become the 'major site for the production of history' in a democratic South Africa (2010: 85–6).

One pertinent and persisting criticism of South African historiography is that it remains too parochial. There is a strong tendency to see the South African past as exceptional and to ignore parallels and connections with other parts of the African continent and beyond. The establishment of the South African Union in 1910 defined boundaries which were historically artificial (for example, excluding Lesotho and Zimbabwe), but which came to limit the way in which its past was studied and written. Many South Africanists remained, and remain, oblivious of the arguments and findings of historians of Africa and other parts of the world with which the country has been closely connected. There are signs that in the coming decade this may be remedied through a more transnational approach. Work such as Landau (2010) on the need to understand the shaping of ethnic identities and forms of popular resistance across the boundaries of the South African state, Ward (2009) on the Asian and Indian Ocean networks into which the

early colonial Cape was integrated, Elbourne (2002) on the complex interweaving of British and South African influences on early nineteenth century missionary policies or Lake and Reynolds (2008) on how Smuts's ideas and policies were shaped by global debates around race and segregation are all pointing the way.

The emphasis of this book is on the key themes of the work that has emerged since the South African historiographical 'revolution' of the 1980s. Still central is the link between racial domination and capitalist growth seen through such topics as the dynamics behind colonial conquest and warfare in the late nineteenth century, the mineral revolution of the 1880s, white worker militancy in the late 1910s and black rural protest in the 1920s. The roots and emergence of segregation between the 1910s and 1940s is a prime theme, setting the context for the rise and fall of modern apartheid between the 1950s and the early 1990s. The implications of this history for the 'New South Africa' are examined in the final chapter. This new edition reports the findings of more recent approaches within the framework of this structure. Although there is a broad chronological progression throughout the book, chapters 3 and 4 emphasize differing themes which span across a wide period. Frequent references are provided to the writings on which this material is based for those who wish to read further.

Suggestions for further reading

- Cobley, A. 2001: 'Does social history have a future? The ending of apartheid and recent trends in South African historiography'. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 613–25.
- Lissoni, A. and Nieftagodien, N. 2010: 'Special issue: Life after thirty – the History Workshop'. *African Studies*, 69, 1–139.
- Saunders, S. 1988: *The making of the South African past: major historians on race and class*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Smith, I. 1988: 'The revolution in South African historiography'. *History Today*, 38, February, 8–10.
- Stolten, H. 2007: *History making and present day politics: The meaning of collective memory in South Africa*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.