

**Prison sentences, to run consecutively or concurrently:  
The Meta-narratives of South African History**

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In this paper I will be reflecting, rather summarily, on a long experience of reading and writing South African history, which has culminated, at least temporarily, in my editorship, with Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard Mbenga, Bill Nasson and Anne Mager, of the *Cambridge History of South Africa*, the second (and, I am glad to say, final) volume of which was officially published earlier this month. These volumes, which together contain over a thousand pages, and weigh about two-thirds of a kilo, purport to present a comprehensive, synthetic view of South African history over the last two millennia (minus the last 17 years), although the emphasis is on the last two to two and a half centuries.

The question which arises out of this exercise, at least in retrospect, is of course, “What South African history?” How can one (or even as in this case 26) write a history of South African which has some claim to comprehensiveness and synthesis in a situation in which there have been so many competing versions of what South African history has been all about. Perhaps the answer would be to take the route of the post-modernist cop-out, but that soon turns into navel-gazing paralysis. Rather we need to recognise the various meta-narratives, and in some way apply, *mutatis mutandis*, the South African motto, *!ke e:/xarra//ke* (which translates from the /Xam as “diverse people unite”.)

A meta-narrative (which is of course a post-modernist term) as I see it, is a plot line, at a high level of abstraction, which all historians make use of so as to provide some order in the chaos of life. Naturally, meta-narratives are composed of the many narratives which make up the specific strands of individual historical production, and in this case work at a lower level than the “meta-histories” which

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<sup>1</sup> I apologise for not giving references, or even names, to most of those authors whose work I discuss implicitly or explicitly. I hope that the initiated will recognise who I am talking about, and if not I will be happy to answer questions to that effect.

Hayden White so famously discussed. Their analysis can reveal, essentially, what historians are wanting to say with the works they have written. To some extent, the various interpretations and organising plots are in conflict, but they should not be seen as divided by “paradigm shifts”, however anxious authors are to claim that they introducing something such. This is because that idea has been seriously devalued from its original Kuhnian formulation. In a paradigm shift, things that were thought to be true are subsequently seen to have been false, or only true under special circumstances (which may of course include the everyday world in which we live). In historical work, certainly with regard to South Africa, meta-narratives are not so much untrue with regard to each other as increasingly inadequate or unsatisfactory. A work like D.W. Krüger’s *The making of a nation : a history of the Union of South Africa, 1910-1961*, a deeply unfashionable<sup>2</sup> description of Afrikaner nationalist high politics, is not in itself mistaken, except no doubt in some of its details. The problem is what it leaves out, and does not consider of importance, but that is of course to a greater or lesser degree the case for any historical work, even including encyclopaedias. Comprehensiveness would be totally unwritable, and even more unreadable.

Three further points need to be made at this stage. The first is that the meta-narratives are often as much employed in the negative as in the positive. There is a large corpus of work on South Africa which derives its meaning from being anti-nationalist, for example, or anti-Marxist. Secondly, various of the narratives which I am attempting to disentangle are sufficiently compatible for it to be possible to combine them in a single work. The most obvious combination has been that of anti-nationalist and Marxist work, but there have been others. What follows, like all academic work, is thus a gross simplification of a more complex reality. Thirdly, what determines the choice of any author as to which narrative will drive his or her work is more likely to be a world view, a *levensbeschouwing*, than something chosen strictly for intellectual reasons. As both volumes of the *Cambridge History* comment, adapting Clausewitz’s famous dictum on war, history in South Africa is the continuation of politics by other means.

In gross terms, the narratives of South African history are about conquest and political power, about inequality and about individualisation. These translate into

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<sup>2</sup> I should point out that this was always the case. The Afrika-Studiecentrum’s copy is of the 7<sup>th</sup> edition, a number few historical works on Africa can have reached.

narratives of nationalism, Marxist and Weberian visions, and those inspired, usually unwittingly, by Durkheim and Tönnies.

### **Nationalism**

Historians very generally put their central concerns into the investigation of high politics, and there are those, most famously perhaps G.R. Elton, for whom this was an article of faith. There is some degree of sense in this, as without a knowledge of state power, and the rules it imposes, and thus of high politics, the constraints on society and economy are not easily discernable. On the other hand, it is surely fallacious to see state power, certainly in South Africa, as all-determinant. It is not just that it would prove necessary to incorporate the actions of politicians outside of the country into that determination. The manipulation of the gold price by American presidents from Roosevelt to Johnson is one such obvious example, but there are many more. It is also that there has been much which operates outside, and is only marginally touched by, the realm of politics. Nevertheless, in part because of the salience of political stances (in the broadest possible sense) among South African historians, nationalist and anti-nationalist histories have been of great importance in the country's historiography.

Nationalism in South Africa, and with them nationalist histories, begin with the English. This is, as I have long argued, the prime South African nationalism, against which all that have followed subsequently have been created in reaction. Something similar has happened with the historiography. From the middle of the nineteenth century, there developed a line of history writing which culminated in the works of G.M. Theal and Sir George Cory in the early twentieth century. Most notably it was about the expansion of the colony, both before but above all after the take over of the Cape by the British at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was closely linked to the 1820 (British) settlers in the Eastern Cape, and was indeed a variant of the American idea of the "manifest destiny" of the "civilized" to drive out the "savage". British rule was seen as beneficial, as a bringer of progress and of the rule of law. It is thus that Cory's *The Rise of South Africa* is actually very largely about the slow conquest of the Eastern Cape from the amaXhosa. Imperial control, constitutional developments and the relations between the colony and the motherland were also seen as among the central elements of South African history. Indeed I

remember Leonard Thompson commenting that in his generation is what above all constitutional history in which he had been trained, and he assumed also others brought up as academics in Anglophone South African universities.

Naturally enough this combination of English-driven progress and colonial conquest can be, and has been, turned on its head. Histories of the colonial conquest of the amaXhosa and of the Zulu state show very much the same basic plot line as Cory, for instance, but with the emphasis placed on the disruption, destruction and disasters of the progress, not the advance of a higher state of human history. Thus, for instance, in Xhosa folk history-telling, it is the British Governor Sir George Grey, not Nonqawuse, who is thought responsible for the Cattle Killing—accurate enough as a metaphor, given the way he exploited it, but not in any sense true in point of fact. Thus, black nationalist historical thought, and much of its academic counterpart, begins from the glories of African polities before colonization and their destruction at the hands of the imperial forces, and at the behest of settler power.

It was not only the Africans who were conquered by the British; it was also the Afrikaners. From the end of the nineteenth century, driven by British threats to the South African Republic, there developed an Afrikaner nationalist story line, around *Een eeuw van onrecht*, (a century of injustice) as the first pamphlet arguing the line of Afrikaner heroism and British perfidy. It is the story of the conquest of the Cape and the Dutch submission to British rule, of the wrongs inflicted upon the Boers, above all through the abolition of slavery and the machinations of philanthropically inclined missionaries, notably John Philip. The highlights are the Great Trek, effectively leading to the white conquest of the South African interior, the establishment of the South African Republic (Transvaal) and the Orange Free State and the two wars, known in this tradition as the First and Second *Vrijheidsoorlogen* (wars of freedom), and to others as the Boer wars or the South African War (as if there hadn't been many others). From there the argument is political, teleologically pointing towards the hegemony of the National Party, the declaration of the Republic and apartheid. But even before this, prominent Afrikaners are generally seen as behaving as if they were fully fledged Afrikaner nationalists, as taught in the Universities of the 1950s and 1960s.

There were a number of answers to this. In part there was the technique of ignoring what the nationalists thought most important. The *Oxford History*—to which I will return—managed to put the Great Trek in two distinct chapters, and out of

chronological order. Clearly, the most academically obvious revolve around the historicisation of ethnicity, and thus of Afrikaner nationalism. In a strange way, though, the most intellectually subtle is to be contained within P.J. van der Merwe's great trilogy on the Cape Trekboers.<sup>3</sup> This is a non-nationalist, and non-teleological history of Cape frontier Afrikaners, much attuned to local ecologies, and beginning the significant South African use of oral history. The tragedy is however that one of South Africa's three greatest historical talents<sup>4</sup> was driven, as much by opposition from nationalists within his own university of Stellenbosch, to spend the time he could spare from terrorising his department and students in an impossibly detailed study of the Great Trek, and the conflicts with the Ndebele state.

With this in mind, it is easy to see how black African nationalist historiography follows much the same plot as that of Afrikaner nationalism. The oppression of conquest is just as evident, as is long struggle for freedom, certainly in the expressions by Mandela and, in a somewhat different way, by Thabo Mbeki, and the final apotheosis, for the Afrikaners in 1948 and 1951, for the Africans in 1994. Both also share the centrality of a single party, the National Party and the African National Congress, to some extent to the exclusion of its competitors. Modern "Struggle history" is a replay of older stories with different protagonists, and perhaps a different moral loading. Perhaps the main difference is that "struggle" history has yet to become as dominant in South African historiography as the Afrikaner nationalist variation did, for a while.

### **Inequalities**

South African is notoriously the country in the world where income inequality is the greatest, and has remained so despite the political transitions of the last decades. This means the explanation for the growth and maintenance of economic equality, and the concomitant social stratification has dominated much of the history and indeed sociology (the two are in fact very different to separate, in South Africa even more than elsewhere) of the country. Clearly this is in important ways a political history, at the very least a history of political economy, but it has nevertheless generally been

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<sup>3</sup> For once, the titles: *Die noordwaartse beweging van die Boere voor die groot trek (1770-1842, Die Trekboer in die geskiedenis van die Kaapkolonie, 1657-1842* and *Trek : Studies oor die mobiliteit van die pioniersbevolking aan die Kaap.*

<sup>4</sup> The others, in my estimation, are C.W de Kiewiet and Charles van Onselen.

presented as if politics was relatively divorced from the forms of stratification it created. At the very least political inequality is seen as deriving from racial and economic distinction, rather than the reverse.

As can be expected, the analysis of stratification in South Africa derives from the two great sociologists of the subject within the Western tradition, Karl Marx and Max Weber. Even though, of course, Weber in his work was greatly influenced by, and reacted against, Marx, it is as well to begin with the younger man, since his work could be used to theorise the existence of the distinct status groups of South Africa under segregation and apartheid. In other words, Weberian approaches could most easily be used to tell stories about racial stratification, which was indeed the lived experience of most South Africans under segregation and apartheid, not just the blacks who saw themselves as victims of such discrimination, but also of at least the more socially aware of the Anglophone whites, who were those who actually wrote much of the sociology, anthropology and history of the country, at an academic level.

Weberian sociology began with an ethnographic description of what were on occasion called “colour castes”, and this was married to a history of the development of racial stratification, going back into the colonial, indeed into Dutch period at the Cape. It was thus a history in which the main line of the story was about the establishment of racial difference, and the prejudice and economic exploitation which accompanied it. Unlike the various nationalist historiographies, this was very seldom something of which the author approved, although it might be possible to see various forms of white racist and certainly segregationist and apartheid thought as a positive Weberian take on South African society.

Part of the advantage of the exercise which I have set myself is that it becomes necessary to seek out those anti-Weberian stories. These are of two types. One is a denial of, or at least an attempt to minimize, the importance of racial stratification, as something which had been created by evil men in the face of the facts. This is generally seen in South Africa as a Liberal strategy, but is actually much more a Christian Democrat tendency, at least when translated into European political terms. It entailed above all a stress on the establishment of a common society within South Africa, stretching across racial, and indeed class, lines, and driven, as much as anything, by education and by the power of Christianity and the actions of missionaries and their converts. Indeed it makes heroes out of those who were simultaneously seen as villains by the Afrikaner nationalists, men like Dr. Johannes

van der Kemp, Dr. John Philip and James Read, and more recently in bodies like the Joint Councils. It provides an interpretation of, for instance, the Eastern Frontier, which, while entitled “Cooperation and Conflict”, relegates the conflict of that most bloody of regions to a few sentences, and extols cooperation and the development of those relationships, social, political and perhaps above all religious, which crossed the lines of colour, of race and of ethnicity.

The other main attack on quasi-Weberian sociology and history was influenced, for once explicitly, by Marxism. For a while it, at least in its weaker versions, became, next to those histories derived from Afrikaner nationalism, the dominant vision in South African social science, thus including history. While there were political reasons for this, there was also a good intellectual basis for writing a South African history which stressed the centrality of the mining revolution in the later nineteenth century, and subsequently, and the development of capitalist control over the country's economy, politics and society. To put things very crudely, even more crudely than any of the Marxist progenitors of the various theories ever would have done, Marxism could explain the growth of a labour force divided by race in terms of the advantages which this gave to capitalist entrepreneurs. It placed a great emphasis on migrant labour as in a sense the central feature of South African society, and saw segregation and apartheid as ways to maintain a system of the capitalist exploitation. Racial politics was thus not seen as the prime mover of society, but rather as the derived consequence of capitalist exploitation, with the corollary that it would disappear with the ending of capitalist power.

With these sorts of arguments, the Marxist plot could continue to explain how the South African economy could grow, at levels that were thought to have been exceptional, through the 1950s and 1960s, on the basis of the exploitation of low-cost black migrant labour. It could also, at a pinch, provide an analysis of the position of why both the black middle class and the white working class, in the latter case certainly after the great strikes on the Rand in the mid-1920s, came to choose political sides essentially against their class position. But the emphasis was on the commanding heights of the economy—literally in the case of the Witwatersrand, metaphorically in the case of the other mines—and of the power of capitalism.

There were of course many arguments that could be worked into this sort of narrative, not merely concerning the major towns. Surprisingly, perhaps, South Africa's rural history is more amenable to an understanding in terms of the

development of a specific form of racial capitalism than might be expected. The sorts of arguments which have been developed in this regard relate to the growth and decline of a commercialized, market orientated African peasantry, to the subsequent pressure on land and the general ecological disruption within the reserves, and also to the processes whereby a capitalist commercial agriculture was developed, via relations of sharecropping and labour tenancy, mainly in the maize triangle of the Free State, Gauteng and the North-west province (to give them their modern designations.) If anything it was in the urban areas where the Marxist narrative had to be toned down. Class struggle could certainly be seen on the mines, at least after the mass of white miners had effectively been promoted out of the working class, but the inhabitants of the townships and of the informal settlements had the problematic habit of not behaving with proper class solidarity. Just how the actions of squatters, resistance to removals or to liquor or pass raids could be fitted into the Marxist narrative remained a problem, and led to considerable tension between the structural Marxists, with a heavy concern for theory and the high ground of Political economy and the social historians for whom everyday experience increasingly mattered.

Although these debates were at the time of considerable vehemence, because the various protagonists inhabited the same arena and were actually able to talk to each other, the more significant challenges to Marxist teleologies came from the genuine economic liberals, those who essentially argued that the economic development of the country had been seriously impaired by the political order. Thus, in stead of being beneficial for South African capitalism, segregation and apartheid were highly detrimental, essentially because they drove up labour costs by restricting the freedom of entrepreneurs to act as they considered best, and by making it much more difficult to invest in training and skills. South African capitalism was seen as much more dynamic than the Marxist vision of the benefits of cheap labour would admit. It must be said that the economic crisis of the 1980s, and the realization that South African growth even in the 1960s had been below that of comparable economies elsewhere in the world made these sorts of arguments increasingly attractive as an explanation for the *Wende* of the 1990s.

In essence, all these narratives, whether nationalist or on stratification, stand or, more usually, fall by their power to explain the political transition of the 1990s. Of course the questions that get asked of those events are highly distinct. They range from



“Why did the Struggle win?” (if it did), through “Why did the Boers give it away?” to “Why did racial capitalism fail?” Perhaps a rounded narrative of the road to 1994 would have to include answers to all these questions, and also, not as easily, to begin to grade the dirt road to Zuma. It will take a great, and very catholic, historian to do this, and as yet there is no sign.

### **Individualisation**

In considering the meta-narratives of South African history, it has to be admitted that a considerable proportion of the profession has a radical distrust of the very idea of a meta-narrative, certainly at the level of the society as a whole. Forms of structural analysis are thought to mitigate against the agency of the actors in South African society. The questions that were asked were likely to revolve around the ways in which individuals and groups managed to survive and to maintain their autonomy even in the oppressive world of segregation and apartheid. These sorts of concerns have allowed historians to write eloquently and well about flower sellers, beer brewers, prostitutes, musicians, to try to see South African history from the point of view of the horse, or the dog, or the protea, and more generally to extol the virtues of community.

The danger of these sorts of approaches should be evident. They can far too easily lead to mindless antiquarianism, and the glorification of the quaint. This is precisely because there is no grand theory to hold the studies together. Social history, at least in South Africa where quantitative, or demographic, work has been staggeringly absent, presents an atomised, not even pointillist, picture.

Nevertheless, there is perhaps a grand theory available, in the work of the third of the Great Trinity of Western Sociologists, Emile Durkheim. He is an author whose influence on South African studies has been subliminal at best. In the *Journal of Southern African studies*, between 1974 and 2007, Durkheim is mentioned precisely eleven times, and in no case was there a direct citation to his work.<sup>5</sup> Tönnies, with whom Durkheim could be linked, fares even worse, being mentioned once, in a review of a book on the Zambian copperbelt. Nevertheless, just as it was possible to

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<sup>5</sup> This is incidentally more than double the mention of Durkheim in the *Journal of African history*, in fifty volumes since 1960, although in the latter case the five mentions do include one citation, though no quotes.

speak prose without knowing it, so it is possible to be a Durkheimian without knowing it, at least at a high level of abstraction. The arguments, in *The Division of Labour in Society*, on the transition from Mechanical to Organic solidarity, or for that matter Tönnies's arguments on the development from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* clearly have their potential resonances in South Africa.

There is a narrative of the modern history of South Africa which is about the break up of the pre-colonial social bonds, about the decreasing relevance of kinship, and in general about individualization. This may be viewed negatively, as for instance in the attacks on the unbelievers during the Cattle Killing, the continual complaints about the insouciance of young women "nowadays" (a present which goes back to the late nineteenth century), or in the fear of "Detribalisation" held by many witnesses to the Natives Economic commission in the early 1930s. This can certainly be seen as an existential danger, as studies of urban witchcraft or of African initiated churches have made clear. It is a narrative which underlies much work on South African women's history, whether explicitly feminist or not, and also much of the urban social history, certainly on the Witwatersrand but also elsewhere. It can however also be viewed positively, as a story of the aspiration for, and pride in the achievement of, a "civilised", westernised, respectable, in a way bourgeois, life style. To argue that this is what South African history is all about would probably not have been intellectually or indeed politically possible before 1994, but in the subsequent dispensation it should be possible, and indeed this would go a long way to explaining the economic and social, and perhaps political, behaviour of the black "middle class" over the last few years. But this photo of Mrs Sontshi taking a dish out of her new oven, taken in East London in the 1950s and lovingly preserved in her family despite the destruction of the house and their forced removal under the Group areas act, provides a wonderful metonym for this line of history.

Obviously, as soon as such a narrative is proposed, then the probability of a counter argument becomes evident. There is certainly potential for conservative, culturalist claims that actually social change has been less virulent than a Durkheimian vision might suggest, that kinship, clanship and tribal affiliation are much more tenacious than might appear at first sight, that the respect of the juniors for their seniors, and more generally the hierarchies of traditional society have survived even the viciousness of apartheid, and are being resuscitated. The arguments for continuities, at least at the level of social and political thought, across the divides of

colonialism have been made with increasing frequency elsewhere in Africa, and certainly could and should be in South Africa. I do not know how such a debate would be resolved, if at all. My own gut feeling can perhaps be gauged from the fact that I first intended to call this paper “Durkheim in South Africa”, and will perhaps sometime write that paper. Nevertheless, just as one of the most interesting historical works of the last decades, Simon Schama’s *The Embarrassment of Riches*, can be caricatured as about the tensions between being stinking rich and Calvinist, so there must be a great book to be written, in the not too distant future, on being stinking rich and African in South Africa. The problems it will have to address, and the lines of argument it will take, seem obvious.

