Current Trends in the Production of South African History

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The future's clear skatties, it's the past that's uncertain[1].

One of us is regarded as one of the founders, in exile, of 'revisionist' historiography in the early 1970s, and dropped out of the academy for ten years in the 1980s[2]. The other's formation was in the 1980s, initially under the influence of 'structuralism' in the economic history department at UCT, subsequently practising 'social history'. This paper gives our reading of the state and trajectory of the contemporary production of history in South Africa. It is the first time we have worked jointly, and this paper represents an unfinished dialogue between our different pre-conceived ideas on the question. We are more concerned with raising issues and problems for discussion than with providing complete answers. We try to situate the contemporary production of history against the background of a past trajectory: of the birth in exile and subsequent rise to hegemony of revisionism-radicalism-Marxism (some academics accept one label; others another) in the English-speaking academy, and (within that) the rise to hegemony in the 1980s of 'social history' as promoted by spokespersons of History Workshop[3].

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[1] Eva Bezuidenhout (Pieter Dirk Uys) at the launch in Darling of Lester Venter's *When Mandela Goes: The Coming of South Africa's Second Revolution*, *Cape Times*, 3/10/1997.

[2] The implicit reasons for Legassick's leaving the university were spelled out in his 'Academic Freedom and the Workers' Struggle', written as the T.B. Davie Memorial Lecture which the University of Cape town invited him to return to South Africa to give in 1979. When he was refused permission to enter the country by the government, UCT at first agreed to distribute the lecture *in absentia*, but the Acting Principal subsequently wrote that 'the university has received legal opinion to the effect that we would risk prosecution if we were to publish your lecture'. Thus only extracts have hitherto been published — in some student newspapers.

[3] Jubber (1997:157) writes recently of 'the theoretical hegemony of Marxist theory over the past three decades'— i.e. since 1967! In South Africa this is a vast exaggeration. In English-speaking white South African universities, the hegemony of liberalism only began to be challenged by Marxism in the 1970s, and Marxism could be said to be hegemonic at the earliest in the 1980s—and was being challenged by the start of the 1990s. A piece in 1990, in fact, writes of 'the ideas of the revisionist historians ... rapidly *becoming* hegemonic within the academies in the 1980s' (Witz & Hamilton 1991:190 e.a.).

Politically, the 1990s has been a dramatic decade for South Africa, opening with the unbanning of the ANC, CP and PAC and proceeding to the establishment in 1994 of an ANC-dominated government following the first democratic elections in the country. With this abrupt transition from white minority rule to democracy, one might have expected a huge upheaval in both academic and popular historical perception: a rush to uncover and re-understand the history of society from the point of view of the oppressed majority. The major point we want to make about the recent and present production of history in South Africa is that there has been no sudden 'rupture' or 'explosion' since 1990, at least in academic historiography. Nothing, in other words, corresponding to the birth of African history in the 'decolonisation' period of 1956-1966, or to the rise of the Dar-es-Salaam school associated with the growth of 'socialist' states in Africa, or to the rise of nationalist Indian historiography alongside the struggle for the independence of India.

This paper takes this point as one that requires explanation, and our discussion of past and present historiography will be oriented around attempting to provide this. We are at the same time conscious of gaps in our knowledge and treatment of the subject.

the social context of 'revisionism'

The cutting edge of South African history writing, as situated among exiles and in predominantly white (English-speaking) universities, moved from liberalism to 'revisionism'-radicalism-Marxism at the start of the 1970s. In doing so, it could be said to have 'skipped over' an African nationalist phase. Or perhaps those who participated in the revisionist paradigm shift assumed (as certainly did the one of us involved) that there already existed a nationalist historiography, and that the real issue was to burrow below this. It is perhaps significant that this was the period in which 'black consciousness' was the dominant political ideology among black students. It is also significant that academic history writers in South Africa have remained, and remain, predominantly white (and male). Ironically, this nationalist historiography was most familiar as presented by white writers, for example, in Eddie Roux's pioneering *Time Longer than Rope* (1948), later to be given more substance in the four volume collection edited by the Americans Thomas Karis and Gwen M. Carter, *From Protest to Challenge* (1972-1977) of documents collected in South Africa in the early 1960s[4]. The

[4] Few academics in the 1960s had read works by Plaatje, Molema or Dhlomo, etc. but, in comparison with Roux's sweep, those are partial histories. Roux's work established a periodisation for the history of African nationalism that has not been seriously challenged by subsequent writers. Significantly, it entirely omits any treatment of the 'mineral revolution', a main topic of revisionism. 'Africanist' ideas affected some white South African academic historians in the 1960s (e.g. Leonard Thompson and John Omer-Cooper), but these could hardly claim to be nationalists. Lodge (1990) highlights the relative absence of historical consciousness in ANC writings and attributes this to the 'ambivalence' of the ANC's 'nationalism' ('nativist' or non-racial). More work needs to be done to trace the content and historiography of African nationalist writing.

same is true of the 'materialist'—in fact, more strictly nationalist also—histories produced by members of the Non European Unity Movement: Hosea Jaffe ('Mnguni' *Three Hundred Years*) and Dora Taylor ('Nosipho Majeke') *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*) were also both white.

The significance of revisionism lay in importing ideas of class into academic discourse on South Africa. In this, revisionism could be said to have merely 'made respectable' a common currency of the liberation struggle[5]. Lodge (1990:171) has argued how, since the 1950s in the ANC, 'the ideas supplied by Marxism' have been more attractive to historical writers than pure nationalism. With respect to the CP, of course, its 'Marxism' has often taken the form of barely-disguised nationalism[6]. However, the trend-setting work in the liberation movement has tended to be written by CP or other Marxist voices containing ideas of class as well as of race. Directly or indirectly, it was these ideas which underpinned the birth of revisionism. It is perhaps not accidental that Harold Wolpe's (1972) well-known materialist explanation of segregation in terms of the articulation of modes of production harks back to analysis by the early CPSA activist David Ivon Jones[7]. Moreover the fullest history of the debates over 'class and race (nation)' within the liberation movement—H.E. and R.J. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* (1969)—appeared shortly before the onset of revisionism. Though their concluding chapter contains its own version of the liberal argument of the incompatibility of apartheid and capitalist economic growth (shortly to be assailed by the revisionists), the revelations of a history of controversy

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[5] This presents a genealogy for revisionism rather different from that argued by Bozzoli and Delius (1990); they hint at this particular genealogy at several points in passing, but do not develop it.

[6] This is not a critique of the theory of 'colonialism of a special type' which, if not fetishised, is of utility in characterising many aspects of segregationist and apartheid South Africa. (Here we differ from Colin Bundy's 1990 critique of CST.) The CP's 'nationalism' comes in deducing from CST that what is required is a 'two-stage revolution', i.e. a 'national democratic revolution' conceived as separate from the taking of power by the working class. It is equally possible to deduce from 'CST' the idea that the working class must lead all the oppressed *to achieve national liberation and democracy* by taking state power and establishing a worker's democracy—achieving the same *ends* as articulated by nationalism, but by class *means*. After all, as Lenin wrote, 'To throw off oppression is the imperative duty of the proletariat as a democratic force, and is certainly in the interests of the proletarian class struggle, which is obscured and retarded by bickering on the national question. But to go beyond these strictly limited and historical limits in helping bourgeois nationalism means betraying the proletariat and siding with the bourgeoisie' (cited by Comrade Mzala in Van Diepen 1988:52).

[7] See Jones (1921:5): 'This, then, is the function of the native territories, to serve as cheap breeding grounds for black labour—the repositories of the reserve army of native labour—sucking it in or letting it out according to the demands of industry. By means of these territories Capital is relieved of the obligation of paying wages to cover the cost to the labourer of reproducing his kind'. See also Bunting's election address in the Transkei in 1929 (in J. & R. Simons 1983:413).

within the movement of resistance over the analysis of South Africa undoubtedly influenced revisionists.

In parallel with revisionism in the academic arena went class analysis in the liberation movement. Joe Slovo's 'South Africa—No Middle Road', published in 1976, is a well-known example of this:

> Since race discrimination is ... the *modus operandi* of South African capitalism, the struggle to destroy 'white supremacy' is ultimately bound up with the very destruction of capitalism itself ... it is just as impossible to conceive of workers in SA separated from national liberation, as it is to conceive of true national liberation separated from the destruction of capitalism (in Davidson *et al* 1976:118,161)[8].

The pervasiveness of such class analysis is illustrated also by the following passage published in 1978 by Thabo Mbeki, today regarded as the ANC's high priest of Africanism and rapprochement with capitalism:

> To understand South Africa we must appreciate the fact and fix it firmly in our minds that here we are dealing with a class society. In South Africa the capitalists, the bourgeoisie are the dominant class. Therefore the state, other forms of social organisation and official ideas are conditioned by this one fact of the supremacy of the bourgeoisie .... The condition of the black workers in South Africa, the place in society allocated to us by the capitalist class, demands that we must assert our right to revolution .... Consider the circumstances in which we might position black capitalism as the antithesis to white capitalism ... black capitalism instead of being the antithesis is rather confirmation of parasitism with no redeeming features whatsoever, without any extenuating circumstances to excuse its existence (Mbeki 1978:7)[9].

The concern of revisionism (initially at least) was with the *interrelationships* of race and class. Revisionism in our view reflected the reality that without deploying *both* concepts it is impossible to get to grips with the history of South Africa. In addition, as writers from Bozzoli (1983a) to Bradford (1996) have reminded us (and as we return to below) it is equally impossible to get to grips with this history without the concept of gender. Revisionism became divided into 'structuralist' and 'social history'

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[8] Or: 'National liberation in its true sense must therefore imply the expropriation of the owners of the means of production (monopolized by a bourgeoisie drawn from the white group) and the complete destruction of the state which serves them' (in Davidson *et al* 1976:141). Other examples of 'movement' works influenced by revisionism are Wolpe (1988) and Pampallis (1991)

[9] He argues that the 'methods and practices of primitive accumulation' have not been transitory (as in Europe) but are endemic to South African capitalism.

camps—but through the 1980s it was probably 'social history' that had the dominant influence.

The period of revisionism's hegemony, from the late 1970s and 1980s, coincided with the rise of a revolutionary social movement in South Africa demanding national liberation, democracy, and an end to capitalism. It was the consonance between ideas on the ground and those of 'revisionist' academics (all white) that lent apparent force to social history. In the townships and the workplaces, the general understanding was—in the words of an NUM resolution—that apartheid and capitalism were 'two inseparable evils that must be smashed[10]. Equally, an early Eastern Cape consumer boycott leaflet was titled 'Industry and Government—two sides of the same bloody coin'[11]. Surfacing sporadically in written sources is this interconnection made in the popular mind. At a 1985 Johannesburg May Day trade union meeting, *The Star* reported:

> Most speakers spoke in Zulu and identified capitalism as the enemy of the black working class in South Africa .... A speaker from [FOSATU] ... brought most of the audience to its feet when he said capitalism was the enemy of the workers, and sang and hummed: 'Capitalism, capitalism is our enemy' (*The Star* 2/5/1985)[12].

Thami Mali, one of the organisers of the two-day November 1984 Transvaal stayaway, asked what the goals of the struggle were, said oneperson, onevote in a unitary South Africa

> 'but that's not enough. It must be a 'workers' state' based on the principles of the Freedom Charter'
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> 'So you want a socialist South Africa'
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> 'Exactly', he replied (*Sunday Express* 11/11/1984).

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[10] See *South African Labour Bulletin* 12.3 (1987) 48. Some of the rest of this paragraph is taken from a forthcoming review article by Martin Legassick in *JSAS*.

[11] *Work in Progress* 39, October (1985) 15. Incidentally, these quotations call into question the following claims of Witz and Hamilton (1991:190): 'the focus on classes and class analysis, which was at the heart of revisionist scholarship, failed to tap in successfully to many popular perceptions of oppression in South Africa. In the 1980s racial oppression remained the central focus of anti apartheid struggles, despite their strong anti-capitalist rhetoric'. This, in our view, privileges 'race' too much: in much popular consciousness, national oppression was seen as the work of the white bosses and state.

[12] E.g. see also Moses Mayekiso, MAWU General Secretary, *FOSATU Workers News* (October 1983); Thozamile Gqweta, President of *SAAWU, The Worker* (October 1984); *Izwilethu* (June/July 1984), official publication of CUSA.

The *Financial Mail* in 1985 reported an opinion survey that 77% of blacks in selected urban areas expressed a belief in socialism (*FM* 20/9/1985). Another such survey conducted at this time showed that more than three quarters of shop stewards interviewed favoured socialism over capitalism; 90% in the Eastern Cape (Orkin 1986:52). The position of workers organised in COSATU was reflected in General Secretary Jay Naidoo's (1986:35) speeches:

> apartheid racism has gone hand in hand with our exploitation and suffering at the hands of the bosses .... Despite the desperate attempts by organised business to distance themselves from the present discredited regime we have learnt one important lesson, that the root and fruit of the apartheid tree is the exploitation of workers in South Africa ... the alliance between big business and the apartheid state is soaked in the blood of the workers[13].

A COSATU delegation told the ANC and SACTU in exile in 1987 that:

> The general feeling among workers is against reform and in favour of restructuring and creation of a new society reflecting the interests of workers ... the majority of workers want fundamental change ('Meeting with COSATU 7/3/1987'—Confidential minutes, ANC Collection, Mayibuye Centre—cited in Adams 1998:105)[14].

All these sentiments signified a widely apparent organic, revolutionary, crisis of South African society. Professor Colin Bundy's (1987:71) inaugural lecture at UCT analysed whether or not a 'revolutionary situation' existed in South Africa, and concluded that 'some but not all of the preconditions for revolutionary change exist'. 'Bluntly', he continued, 'something has got to give. Restructuring is unavoidable. But what form will it take?' (see also Bundy 1989). The 'form' that restructuring in fact took—to the surprise of many activists—was the so-called 'miracle' of a negotiated settlement. In retrospect some might argue that this represented the consummation of the revolution—or perhaps of its 'first stage', though the SACP, with its slogan of 'deepening democracy', implies that the first stage is not yet reached. We would argue rather that the revolution is *incomplete, stalemated. The Revolution Deferred* is the title of a recent book by Martin Murray, though nowhere in the book does he explicitly refer to or explain the title[15]. Completion of the revolution would involve the working class

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[13] E.g. see also *SALB* 12,4 (1987) 33-35; 12,5 (1987) 60.

[14] Significantly, at this stage the ANC delegation (including both Joe Slovo and Thabo Mbeki) 'strongly argued' against putting forward 'the socialist perspective', i.e. they were for separating the struggle for national liberation from the struggle against capitalism and for workers' power.

[15] Murray (1994:141 e.a.) writes: 'During the 1980s, the popular upsurge aginst white minority rule and the apartheid system spilled over into a genuine grassroots rebellion against the logic and the rules of the capitalist marketplace .... Yet with the onset of multiparty negotiations in the post-1990 period, the profound political realignment through which political parties sought literally to reinvent themselves in the changing circumstances of pluralist electoral competition favoured a *Thermidorian*, or moderating thaw in the locus of thinking about the future'. Murray refers to the 'unanticipated resilience of the capitalist economic order'. 'Thermidorian', however, implies a post-revolutionary 'moderation' rather than the deferring of a revolution.

taking up the incomplete democratic and social tasks in a struggle for workers' power. Just as the social context of the 1980s affected the climate of historiography, so does the 'uncompleted revolution' context of the 1990s.

Coasting with the tide in the 1980s, social history has attracted powerful compliments. Terence Ranger (1991:5), though critical of aspects of its 'radicalness', has celebrated its achievements as 'dynamic and committed and honest'. Shula Marks (1986) has called the rewriting represented in the work of revisionist scholars a 'revolution in our understanding of South African history'. Eric Foner (1995:166), the celebrated United States historian, has described South African social history as having produced 'some of the world's finest historical scholarship' in this vein. He argues that the social historians have 'rewritten South African history to emphasise the experience of black labourers in rural areas and in urban mines and industries' and that 'it gave voice to those excluded from traditional accounts, often through oral histories that allowed ordinary people to relate their lives and express their aspirations'.

The consonance of popular revolutionism and radical history-making in the academy in the 1980s introduced some heady ideas. It was believed that academic history, as social history, could become popularised: translated into the conception of history held by 'the masses'. The atmosphere was captured by Colin Bundy (1990:139f) in the following terms:

> the ivory tower has already been breached by popular pressures: grappling irons promise further to scale its walls, and its base of academic autonomy is being undermined .... South African radical historians inhabit a present that makes comprehension of the past seem particularly important. Their society's history does not present itself meekly for examination. It intrudes, fierce and feverish, baring its deformities, and demanding immediate attention.

The attendance at Wits History Workshop 'open days', the support of the NECC for 'people's history' projects, etc. all encouraged such a belief.

The turn to negotiations in the 1990s and the resultant demobilisation of a mass movement has transformed the conditions for the 'popularisation' of history. With politics in the 1990s now more concerned with the 'pacting of elites' rather than eruptions of the masses, once again 'history' is made 'from above' rather than 'from below'. The ANC has become transformed from the vehicle through which the masses sought transformation of society in the 1980s into the staunch defender of neo-liberal capitalism in the 1990s. In parallel, there has been a huge erosion in popular interest in academic presentations of the past. As Paul Maylam (1995) observed at the 1995 *SAHS* conference at Rhodes, social history has largely been confined to the site of the professional historian and the university. Leslie Witz and Ciraj Rassool (1992) have described how, despite near 'missionary work' of popularisation, social history has remained 'on the margins' of popular and public domains. Shula Marks (1996) has commented on the 'disappointed expectations' as a result of the limited recognition in school history curricula and textbook of 'the [real] historiographical advances of the last thirty years'. As to the character of the 'popular history' being presently made, we return below. For the moment what we are concerned with is the effects of the 1980s

beliefs in popularisation on the construction of history in the academy[16].

Consciously or not, the urge to 'popularisation' of revisionist history constituted an intervention in the political arena. In this respect, in our view, spokespersons of History Workshop can be criticised for a belief in the 'uplifting' role of the intellectual qua intellectual[17]. In a reflective piece at the end of the 1980s Bozzoli contrasted the 'Gramscian' concept of this role from what she regarded as the 'Althusserian':

> Forging an alternative set of historical interpretations would challenge hegemony on a high level; but making these new interpretations popular would provide the already-conscientized masses with greater insight and understanding of the structural conditions they confronted. The essentially Gramscian aim of raising the capacity of the mass of the people for self emancipation—so that the popularisation of history involved a process of empowerment of the people themselves—ran against the Althusserian idea that emancipation would come from above and from 'theory'. Gramscians stood somewhere between a belief in the subordination of the intellectual to the movement, and one in the subordination of the movement to theory (Bozzoli 1990:241f; see also Bozzoli 1983:8).

What Bozzoli here calls 'Althusserian' is that mis-interpretation of Lenin's *What is to be Done?* which is held by Communist Parties and many Trotskyist grouplets: the idea that workers are capable only of 'trade-union consciousness' and that 'socialism' must be brought to them from outside by intellectuals[18]. In fact Bozzoli's characterisation of the 'Gramscian' approach does not entirely escape this[19]. Moreover, an 'intellectual' is

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[16] In these paragraphs we have benefited from reading Rousseau (1994; 1995) and Greenstein (1996). In the original version of the paper we also offered some criticism of Rosseau and Greenstein's standpoint which we have dropped from this version because it is not central to the argument: we still hold to the essence of our critique of them however. Subsequent to writing the draft of this paper we read Tshidiso Maloka's as yet unpublished 'Writing for Them: "Radical" Historiography in South Africa and the "Radical" Other', which makes telling points.

[17] As with other critics of Wits History Workshop, we direct our attention to the 'manifestoes' of its chief spokesperson of the 1980s, Belinda Bozzoli, in her introductions to collected volumes. This of course begs the question as to how far the pieces in the collections live up to the prescriptions of the manifestoes: see Minkley (1986).

[18] See Legassick (1991:17f) where it is argued that the history of the twentieth century shows rather non-socialist 'intellectual' leaders of working-class organisations crushing 'socialist' struggles by the working class. Bozzoli (1983:34) criticises the view that 'inadequacies in leadership, organisation or "line" are to be blamed for the usual failure of the oppressed classes to develop "proper" class consciousness'. Legassick's view differs in that (a) it is not a question of a 'failure' of the oppressed classes to 'develop "proper" class consciousness'; and (b) as Trotsky pointed out, 'leadership is not at all a mere "reflection" of a class', but is likely to rise 'above' accountability to the class and thus to lag behind it in consciousness.

regarded by the Communist Party, the Trotskyist grouplets, and Bozzoli alike as *someone in a university* rather than, as Lenin intended in *What is to be Done?* as a cadre schooled in the Marxist party, a worker-intellectual[20]. The 'academic' can masquerade as the bringer of 'objective truth' (which is in reality only an interpretation) because of her or his claim to inhabit a privileged 'site of knowledge'. The party-activist 'intellectual', on the other hand, is compelled to reveal his or her 'party-sanship'—though this does not thereby preclude her or him from expressing truth(s)[21]. For whites, however, purely on the basis of a position in the university, to claim to be asserting 'truth' to the populace has strong elements of a patronizing paternalism.

The second criticism that can be, and has been, raised of History Workshop's 'popularisation' politics is that it came to privilege class over 'race'. It is true (and conceded by Bozzoli) that there was a tendency to 'workerism'[22] in the History Workshop of the 1980s[23]. In the early 1980s the proponents of History Workshop may

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[19] Ordinary people's testimony, she suggests, will narrow the 'cognitive gap' between 'those who write about capitalism and those who bear the brunt of it' (Bozzoli 1983:16). Implicit in this is the idea that those who 'write' about capitalism are somehow immune from detrimental effects from it: 'above it'?

[20] Gramsci, equally, would not have regarded an 'intellectual', particularly an organic intellectual, as someone within a university, but primarily as a party cadre. His writings are of course disguised in non-class, non-party language because written in prison; and he may also have been affected by the Stalinist distortion of the meaning of Lenin's *What is to be done?*

[21] Any history is a mere interpretation of the world. But this does not preclude it from corresponding to some reality of the past, or of the experience of 'ordinary people', as seems to be implied by some post-modernists. The tests for 'truth' lie in the subjection of any individual interpretation to collective criticism. As Engels once put it: 'the sovereignty [i.e. objectivity] of thought is realised in a number of extremely unsovereignly-thinking human beings; the knowledge which has an unconditional claim to truth is realised in a number of relative errors; neither [absolutely true knowledge, nor sovereign thought] can be fully realised except through an endless eternity of human existence' (*Anti-Dühring*).

[22] We use the term 'workerism' here because it was current in the 1980s as a term of critique by pro-SACP elements, not because we regard it as an accurate characterisation of a position. We would criticise the term for amalgamating a critique of economism with a critique of those standing for the political independence of the working class (not to be confused, as the SACP does, with a 'hostility to alliances with the middle class': political independence of the working class is quite compatible with an alliance with the middle class for democracy and socialism). Thus it amalgamates a legitimate critique of a conservative tendency (economism) with a critique of a revolutionary tendency. See Fisher and 'Monroe' (1988:47-53)

[23] N. Rousseau (1994:116f), however, argues that Bozzoli and Delius shift ground in their 1990 piece, deflecting the charge of 'workerism' 'onto the structuralists and one or two other renegades who maintain a hard proletarian stance'. She also argues that the 'theoretical and political importance of race appears virtually for the first time in [revisionist?] academic South African historical studies in this particular article'.

well have gone along with many other white (and black) intellectuals who believed that a workers' party could emerge immediately which would supplant the ANC[24]. Many of those (whites) who held this belief were shattered by the emergence of COSATU and its rapprochement with the ANC in 1985-1986, and made switches in which can be seen the seeds of later more dramatic abandonment of socialism[25]. For Bozzoli, the explanation lies in the nature of South African popular culture which is 'nationalist':

> popular culture is not straight-forwardly class conscious. It is mainly constituted through community, regional, ethnic, local, gender, or racial categories. For a complex variety of reasons, only rarely does 'class' form the significant element in cultural formations .... black popular culture tends to engender and sustain ideologies of a nationalist, populist, 'motherist', or racially-defined character (Bozzoli 1990a:239; see also Bozzoli 1987).

She adds: 'This is not, of course, to deny the analytical value of class as a concept'[26].

Where, in our view, this conception of Bozzoli's errs is in failing to see that the 'culture' of the working-class is never of a 'pure class' character[27]. 'Workerism' erred in identifying the 'working-class' with the working-class at the point of production. The Communist Party critique of 'workerism' erred equally on this point, failing to regard the overwhelming majority of women, youth and men in the townships and countryside as part of the working class (see Fisher & 'Monroe' 1988). But the standard for judging the character of the culture of this broader working class cannot be a comparison with the character of class culture in Europe. The black working class in South Africa is a colonised working class, subjected to national and gender oppression as well as class exploitation. Its culture reflects all these concerns. To try to put the culture of the working class in South Africa into a 'racial' bag, a 'national-democratic-two-stage' bag (the SACP) or a (mostly) 'nationalist' bag is to impose preordained limits on it.

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[24] Among black worker-intellectuals who believed this at the time were Moses Mayekiso, James Motlatsi (then vice-president and now President of the NUM) and Cyril Ramaphosa. Comrades in the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC had discussions with all these, putting the position that the ANC could not be by-passed, and that the need was for its transformation into an organisation led by the working class. All subsequently joined the ANC.

[25] See for example Alec Erwin's (1985) confused article which—to paraphrase its circumlocutions—argues for transformation politics through the leading role of the working class in the ANC but in fact accepts the 'nationalism' of the ANC. Compare, on this point Rousseau (1994:99f footnote 47).

[26] Bozzoli and Delius (1990:38), by the way, are incorrect when they write that 'Legassick ... subsequently came to reject any consideration of nationalism far more consciously when he moved into Trotskyist politics'. As a supporter of the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC, Legassick was concerned with analysing, and struggling for, the best path to end national oppression in South Africa because national oppression was at the forefront of popular consciousness: see issues of *Inqaba ya Basebenzi* 1-27 (1981-1990)

[27] Thus, Rousseau (1994:101ff) criticises Bozzoli's privileging of the concept of class in the face of this popular 'nationalist' culture.

The new conditions of 'uncompleted revolution' remove a material underpinning of revisionist ideas. Anti-capitalism and ideas of class have become very unfashionable in official society. But what is to take their place in historiography? Does not this transition from the revolutionary climate of the 1980s to the bland climate of 'reconciliation' of the 1990s go part way to explain why the transition has not (as yet anyway) been associated with any breaks or explosions in historiography? A commentator on the 'Future of the Past' conference held at UWC last year wrote how:

> The Mayibuye Centre was concerned to criticise the professional history-producing establishment, including their colleagues in the History Department, for not writing the history of 'The Struggle' and for not labouring at the 'rockface' of the political struggle (Hamilton 1996:146).

But what *kind* of history of the struggle is being demanded in this critique? Is it a popular history 'from below'? Or is it a triumphalist nationalist history? Or a 'reconciliation' history?

There are certain common features between the approach of South African social historians and the 'subaltern studies' school in India. Both have stressed 'history from below' and popular agency. Both have expressed themselves hostile to nationalism and to a triumphalist nationalist history of 'great men'. To say this, however, disguises their differences. 'Subaltern studies' arose in a quite different context. It represented a challenge from 'within the nation' to the hegemony of nationalist (and 'Marxist' which were in fact nationalist) ideas in post-colonial Indian historiography[28]. South African social history arose while society was still 'colonial' to challenge first liberalism of the 'colonisers' and then a nationalist presentation of the history of the colonised. It might be considered merely a branch of the 'historiography of the colonisers'. In this case, particularly under conditions of an 'uncompleted revolution', the historiographic break might express itself as a nationalist reaction to it. At the same time, the challenge 'from below' represented by social history to 'nationalist ideas' cannot be wished away. To move from a concern with nationalism to a concern with subalternity seems a logical progression. To return from concern with subalternity and conflict to concern with nationalism and/or reconciliation seems a rather harder road to travel: more difficult, perhaps impossible.

recent 'social history' writing: its strengths and limits

At the same time academic history production in South Africa has continued to generate a range of new and divergent works. In recent years there has been a revitalisation of 'precolonial' studies; intense debates and new analyses of early colonial histories in southern Africa; reassessments of the role and importance of

[28] See the essays collected in Prakash (1995)

mining and the mines in South African history in a number of new works; a spate of historical and political biographies; and a growing literature on the forms of rule and nature of opposition to apartheid, amongst others. We can do little justice to the range of topics, critiques and fields of attention that are visible within and about this growing South African historiography. Instead we will focus on what are variously regarded as three of the best histories produced in the post 1990 period.

In doing so we hope to illuminate aspects of: (a) the relationship to subaltern perspectives within these histories; (b) the visibility of any theoretical shift comparable to the shift marked by class in the 1970s; (c) the implications these analyses have for a potential route back to concerns of nationalism.

The three books we wish to focus on are Charles van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine*, Isabel Hofmeyr's *We Spend our Years as a Tale that is Told*, and Tim Keegan's *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order*. All three are embedded in South African revisionist social history. As such, they are concerned with rewriting the past to emphasise the experiences and give voice to those previously excluded from traditional accounts, in order to provide a more inclusive, representative and subaltern perspective, while also attempting to detail what this meant for various forms of rule. At the same time, though, each of the three books moves beyond a social history 'from below' approach in different ways.

The first, Charles van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine* is an appropriate starting point. It has been received as the 'classic' of South African social history, as a 'singular work' and one 'without compare in South African studies' (Bundy 1997:364, 367). It is the massively detailed history 'from below' of a South African sharecropper in the twentieth century and the product of nearly fifteen years of collaborative and individual research and production (Nasson 1996). Despite having emerged earlier as a historical subject in the work of Nkadimeng and Relly (1983), Kas Maine has been put on the historical map by this biography, facilitated through the research work of the currently-named Institute For Advanced Social Research with Van Onselen as Director.

In this sense *The Seed is Mine* represents a kind of 'flagship' of the social history approach that has emphasised experience, hidden history, and subaltern black agency in the making of the South African past, and is produced by someone widely regarded as South Africa's 'premier historian' (Bundy 1997:363). The strength of the book is also seen to reside in its distinctive method and processes of historical recovery, in order to present this 'living slice' as a 'whole' (Nasson 1996:3). Thus Van Onselen begins this extraordinary book with an equally extraordinary context: that Kas Maine's life, with one minute exception, does not appear in the supposed mainspring of national memory—the State Archives. It is a history without official record and of a family with no documentary existence. Of course, as Van Onselen shows over the next 535 pages, memory and the past have many other mainsprings, enabling the production of this monumental 'history from below' and thus equally demonstrating the possibilities and necessities of its method. It is a work rich in thick description primarily reliant—at least on the surface—on the detailed collection and analysis of oral history and memory.

The book then, recreates the life of Kas Maine within its class context of the rise (late nineteenth and early twentieth century), brief zenith and subsequent

disintegration (after the 1930s) of a class of black sharecroppers in the southwestern Transvaal. He is a Samuel Smiles hero, a self-made man—brought down in the end by apartheid. This trajectory is closely intertwined with the history, nature and production of white owned and worked land, and ultimately with the development and encroachment of white capitalist relations of production in agriculture. This is the narrative thrust of *The Seed is Mine*, although it is simultaneously a narrative in which Kas Maine and his productive wishes, strategies, entrapments and forms of independence are mapped in all their specifics of locality and change.

In addition though, as Bundy has suggested, there is also a second story intertwined with it and resting on the concern with the sharecropping family as a 'social entity' (Bundy 1997:366; drawing on Van Onselen 1996:9). Here is Bundy's description:

> Kas Maine may have been heroic in his versatility as farmer, stock-breeder, artisan, mechanic, trader, speculator, and traditional healer. Yet many readers will wince at his record as husband and father: flogging his daughters, estranging his sons, marginalising his wives. What van Onselen makes possible is an understanding of how two sets of demands—economic viability and domestic pliability—colluded and collided (Bundy 1997:367).

It is in these intersections between productive structure and peasant agency, and between sharecropper and patriarch, that Van Onselen parts company with much South African social history. The categories of 'history from below' and of subaltern agency and experience as distinctive and 'autonomous' are problematised. The book details how relations of kinship and paternalism were painful and violent, but also intimate and searing in their interactions between different categories of black and white people on the Highveld. This meant that experience was a 'painful *shared* experience', mutually determining in many respects and that a South African identity, including racial identity emerged out of a nexus of complex relations between trust and betrayal, compassion and humiliation, love and hatred. Thus Terry Ranger (1997:384) suggests that Van Onselen's biography enables us to see that 'Kas lives most of his life as an Afrikanerised black on the land of Africanised whites'. Relationships between farmers and sharecroppers are much more fully integrated than in the conventional social history. There is little place, moreover, for simple racial stereotype when the most oppressive landlord in the book is black.

The major new insights in *The Seed is Mine* are primarily those of content around the shared and interconnected nature of rural experience. At the same time, Van Onselen (1996:vi-vii) argues that 'the field ha[s] barely given way to the factory, the peasant to the proletarian, and the patriarch to his family': these changes, in other words, are recent. This effectively inserts a 'peasant's voice' onto the centre stage of the history of twentieth century and apartheid South Africa. Revisionism (including, arguably, earlier work by Van Onselen (1976) admittedly on Rhodesia and not South Africa) constructed the migrant mineworker as the central subject of racial and class division of the society and its history. Now, for Van Onselen, it is rather the mutual experiences of the sharecropping peasant on the Highveld that is the 'very gastric juice of South Africanism' and which should be the model or social vanguard of 'South

Africa's adolescent nationhood' (Nasson 1996:3). It is a book larger than itself, a model of the South African past, standing for that past. Its past moreover—in contrast to the old norm of social history—is consistent with the idea of reconciliation. This rests not on a history of simple racial separation, exclusion and the repression of imagined difference (and thus on forgetting) but also on a history of social assimilation, inclusion, 'cultural osmosis', of 'paternalism and violence', of a shared, albeit uneven past of an 'inescapable inter-racial milieu'[29]. The message of the book is thus ambiguous as regards the present of reconciliation. On the one hand it has a past premised on a reading of power relations and conflict that also involves social assimilation (within and beyond the categories of race). Making that past visible makes the politics of reconciliation a much more deeply embedded historical project than is conducted by the TRC, for example. On the other hand, however, the book emphasises the dramatic shaping impact of a complex rural class conflict and transition to agrarian capitalism 'from below'. These conflicts of class would be displaced and silenced if all-embracing racial definitions (as defined by apartheid and resistance to it, and assumed in the TRC discourse) were taken as the categories to be reconciled.

Two areas are important in examining the production of academic history in South Africa. The first relates to methodology: of how peasants (and Kas Maine) speak in the book. The second relates to the ways that the empirical research is combined with theoretical analysis of social and economic change. As regards the first there is a significant paradox. Kas Maine's memory and his feats of remembrance validate the whole book as a subaltern 'peasant' voice of the past and of history. Yet Maine's voice is not made explicit in the book, and neither is his or others' remembrances made explicit as memory. As importantly, though, Kas Maine's memory and his voice is seen to exemplify 'history living on in the mind' where he 'never once ceased to amaze with the accuracy, depth and extent of his insights into the social, political and economic structures that dominated the south-western Transvaal'.

This shows, by the way, a different sense in which the book can be taken as reconciliation history. Colin Bundy (1997:369) has suggested that in its combination of fine empirical research with analysis rooted in theoretical understanding of economic and social change, *The Seed is Mine* has 'outstripped or transcended the either/or [structuralists vs social historians] antinomies of the 1980s'. The evidence of memory then, not only tells the peasant or subaltern story but also that of structures, providing the means to 'transcend the either/or antinomies of the 1980s scholarship'. What is startling, however, is that this is done without an engagement of memory, without

[29] The notions of 'cultural osmosis' and of paternalism and violence are drawn from the titles of two prior van Onselen articles (1990; 1992) which predate the book and discuss some of its theoretical and methodological underpinnings. The notion of a reconciliationist history is our own, and is contrasted to the growing representations presented in official versions aimed at achieving political reconciliation, as in the TRC, for example. The terms 'inescapable inter-racial milieu' is Nasson's (1996:4), talking about van Onselen's analysis of sharecropping in more distant decades where Afrikaners were Africanised and Africans Afrikanerised through processes of social assimilation.

making the positions of historian-writer, interviewer-researcher, and interviewed-source explicit or problematic.

More generally, the biography, despite the far more suggestive concern with issues of how 'peasants speak' hinted at in an earlier article by Van Onselen (1993), does not substantially engage issues of the social constructions of language, memory and history. The conventional approach to 'memory as evidence' remains firmly in place. *The Seed is Mine* is not just the story of Kas Maine, but it is suggested that it is how Kas Maine himself would tell it—it is representative of his subaltern viewpoint and interpretation. Yet because of the nature of expression and translation of that memory, Kas Maine's actual voice is silenced. Maine hardly makes it onto the 535 pages 'in his own voice', i.e. in extended quotations of his own words, yet the evidence from his memory enables a significant rewriting of the past.

In addition, Van Onselen (1996:8) argues that

> Kas Maine's odyssey was but a moment in a tiny corner of a wider world that thousands of black South African sharecropping families came to know on a journey to nowhere.

In this sense Kas Maine also stands for the subaltern voice of all sharecroppers. Personal memory or memories also stand for collective ones. The paradox that this is really Van Onselen's story, his voice, his practice of writing history involving memory as evidence which is almost obsessively sifted, checked, ordered, referenced and cross-referenced, evaluated and processed by him—the professional historian—into the remembrance of real collective subaltern experience of structure and of agency should also not be forgotten.

If Van Onselen provides one model of contemporary history writing, then Isabel Hofmeyr's work provides a significantly different model. Her book, *We Spend Our Years as a Tale that is Told* (1993) is also enormously reliant on forms of oral history and of engaging varying forms of subaltern agency and dominance. It also broadly covers a similar periodisation, and is also focused on the Highveld. It is, however, about a chiefdom, rather than an individual sharecropper. Hofmeyr is therefore concerned with broader patterns of oral historical narrative and with the nature and form of orality, literacy and intellectual meanings of the past in range of formats, including those of memory, manuscript and monument.

The study provides three crucial thresholds against which the wider study of orality and literacy in Makopane or Valtyn is explored[30]. Rather than drawing the local

[30] The first threshold is that of the conversion of the chiefdom into a rural location in the 1890s, together with the advent and impact of missionaries and the literacy they brought in this period. the second threshold of chance occurred from the 1930s, with the advent of direct intervention in the form of 'betterment', under the institution of the literate bureaucracies of the native Affairs Department in particular. Up until the 1950s this was haphazard and half-hearted, but thereafter, as the third threshold of coercive apartheid social engineering emerged, the intrusion of white political authority into the 'heart' of the chiefdom was marked. This was finally effected by a series of forced removals in the 1960s.

into the general (Kas Maine standing for the experience of sharecropping and Maine's experience that of South African history told large) Hofmeyr argues that any interaction between orality and literacy needs to be sought in the details of each particular context. Thus literate government bureaucracies, schooling and religion were 'oralised' in important ways, while the chiefdom, and various agents within it, both constructed, appropriated and transformed the meanings of writing and of identity. In other situations, though, opposing notions of literacy and orality provided 'metaphorical banks of images through which both historical life and political life [we]re conceptualised' and acted upon, as in the cases of legitimating chiefly rule and of engaging forced removals. Thus a central argument is that while it was overall the 'barbed wire (representative of a 'literate' intervention) that caged the spoken word' the interweaving and confrontations between orality and literacy, and of the oral performance politics of chiefdoms and the control of literate institutions, was a major source of political conflict on the Highveld (Hofmeyr 1993: 9-15; Chs 3 & 4).

Hofmeyr's work moves significantly beyond the boundaries of social history in her analysis of the form and power of language in shaping meaning and determining subaltern subject positions in a South African locality. Equally, she demonstrates the importance of new theoretical insights around concerns with language, intellectual histories and identity formation. These combinations of 'oral and written technologies of the intellect', although emphasised as within particular sets of social and political sites and struggles (of household, gender and place, for example) are also engaged by Hofmeyr as within the constitutive and 'cognitive' nature of language. The implications this has for subjectivity, agency and popular and political consciousness are variously explored in the book as are the relationships and encounters between memory, tradition and history in the construction of local meanings, power and identity in the articulations of pasts and presents.

Two aspects stand out in Hofmeyr's account. The first is the reflexive nature of the presentation. There is a conscious attempt to continually relate her position as author and researcher, the narratives of her informants and the evidence of differing pasts in a manner that is explicated on the page[31]. The result is an engagement with history and memory that allows several different but interrelated dramas to unfold, while the meanings and terms of their construction also remain visible, and part of the process of history making. This also means that, secondly, Hofmeyr is able to challenge notions of tradition and of modernity, for example, through an analysis that situates 'oral' and 'written' worlds in differing cultural and intellectual contexts. In the process the very notions of modernity and tradition are rendered problematic, and once read through the different categories of orality and literacy, 'tradition' becomes visible as

[31] It should be noted that the appendices of the book, containing lengthy segments of oral narrative, forms a significant part of the overall work, as part of her more reflexive and more serious engagement with taking these historical narratives seriously. At the same time, there are also lengthy sections within her text itself, where these issues are explicitly addressed.

lived modernity, and as complex and changeable. Her work also shows how 'the traditions of modernity' are equally present as variously violent, exclusive and conflictual, but also interwoven and interdependent in settler and chiefly worlds. At the same time, the nuanced interweaving of concepts makes problematic any easy or simple dichotomous conceptions of nationalism and political reconciliation.

It is to these concerns of 'orality' and 'literacy' as the central organising concepts of the book that we wish to draw attention. Hofmeyr demonstrates that any interaction between orality and literacy (rather than using notions of explanation between tradition and modernity) needs to be sought in the details of each particular context and that the impact of literacy has no automatic consequence and cannot be predicted. As the case studies illuminate, the relationship between the spoken and the written was simultaneously complexly interwoven in practice, and symbolically oppositional *in the idea* of orality (supposedly for tradition) and that of literacy (supposedly for the modern). She argues, though, that by the 1960s, historical tales had been transformed under social and political pressures, but also by the combination of oral and written historical accounts. In this context, and within the substantive changes between male and female, and between historical and fictional storytelling, the 'radical attrition of memory' has currently taken place, alongside the amplitude of a previously marginalised and patronised craft of storytelling.

Hofmeyr thus provides a rich and nuanced account of the ways in which words—spoken and written—have eloquence and power, but also of the ways they are socially constructed and undergo thresholds of change, decline, attrition and amplitude. She highlights the social conditions that control texts and audiences, but also shows that attention to narrative structure is necessarily central to revealing the substance of ideas, differing intellectual traditions (chiefly and settler) and the different and changing meanings of the past entailed in different dominant and subaltern, and modernist and nationalist accounts. Thus, for example, she is able to combine text and context in an exploration in the production of local or 'indigenous' forms of knowledge in the Mokopane or Valtyn chieftancy through looking at the oral historical narration dealing with the 'story of the cave of Gwala' (the siege of Makapansgat in 1854). She argues that these historical tales are drawn from 'the intellectual traditions underpinning chieftancy' and are 'complex investigations into the meaning of chiefship as a system of political authority and as a symbol of the entire social order' but also that the interaction between oral and written accounts of the siege, and between chiefly and settler accounts were by no means separate entities. They influenced each other in significant ways so that the 'neat distinction between chiefly/oral and settler/written is not possible' (Hofmeyr 1993:14).

> Hence, somewhere along the line, most written (settler) documents were based on oral testimony .... Equally, chiefly versions of the story appropriated into themselves fragments from the written accounts. In terms of their implicit forms of interpretation, the two traditions also intersect in interesting ways ....

But they have also changed in relation to the changing fortunes of the chiefdom, and in

relation to the changes in the production, form and content of the storytelling. The story of the South African past, then, which draws on Hofmeyr's approach to social history and subalternity, is also much more mutual and interconnected than previously imagined, and the possibilities of a radical nationalist break in academic history production is equally rendered as problematic if her work is held up as a model.

Focused through the concepts of orality and literacy, then, Hofmeyr's study has significant other implications. Not only does she suggest the need to attend to the orality of all written sources[32], and thus the entire documentary bias that still ranks the written over the spoken in history, but also that to explore subaltern memory, identity and agency requires new cultural contexts and forms of analysis where language, translation and the 'evidence of experience' are engaged as material, social and narrative constructs. Thus, she says,

> while there has been a lot of work that is based on oral historical information, this scholarship has tended to mine testimony for its 'facts' without paying much attention to the forms of interpretation and intellectual traditions that inform these 'facts' (Hofmeyr 1993:9).

A third very different work that examines the tensions of rule is that of Tim Keegan's *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (1996). While Hofmeyr's work is situated in the meeting ground between text and context and between that of orality and literacy—and between social history and literary studies—and Van Onselen's between the structures and agency of 'history from below', Keegan's study sets out explicitly to synthesise revisionist writing on nineteenth century South Africa in opposition to liberal historiography. Keegan's book has a number of strengths and as the best syntheses are, is strikingly original: he traces the origins of modern SA racism and the racial state into the early period of integration of the Cape into the British Empire, re-assesses the relationships between Dutch slavery and British colonialism, tracks regional and imperial dimensions that have not been previously explored and compared, and reviews conventional interpretations of such key moments as the Great Trek. Here, for example, he presents a strong argument, backed with evidence, to show the deep involvement of leading English-speaking settlers in producing what are conventionally regarded as Afrikaner apologia for the Trek. This is breathtakingly daring! Moreover, the liberal tradition is revealed as not only being Janus-faced, but as deeply embedded within the violent construction of racialised and subaltern subjects.

At the same time, however, Keegan's work reflects some of the tensions of this kind of synthesis. It is largely a 'history from above'. It is about how the structures of dominance: of accumulation, the colonial state and settler society were developed and how these structures of dominance necessarily and increasingly shaped the racialised

[32] Hofmeyr (1994; 1995) has engaged these issues in relation to oral history in South Africa in two important papers.

agency of white settlers, trekkers, administrators, politicians and intellectuals and the racialised encounters of agency.

It is no criticism to say that what the book also highlights are the relative silences of nineteenth century accounts of subaltern and 'indigenous' agency in the construction of colonial society. In this sense, while Keegan's book suggests and explores the competing agendas for using power and the competing strategies for gaining and maintaining control of the colonial racial order, as well as the differing ways in which a range of settler subjects became 'agents of empire', the related absence of engagement with those identified as 'the colonised' is problematic. Keletso Atkins' (1993) work on colonial Natal, for example, argues that a distinctly African work culture influenced and constrained the apparently dominant work culture of developing capitalism at this time. This made for a colonial encounter that was always contested, moving and changeable, and not only for the colonised but also the colonisers. Hamilton's (1993:78) work on Shaka also points to the 'historically conditioned dialectic of intertextuality between "western" models of historical discourse and indigenous traditions of narrative'. As Greenstein (1995:226) has argued further, for Hamilton this means, amongst a range of arguments that 'colonialism' is not a separate entity that simply acts upon indigenous societies and forms colonial subjects, but that it is rather itself implicated in and inspired by indigenous voices, and vice versa. Equally she argues that the 'subaltern' and the 'rulers' are formed by various engagements that interact, constrain and modify each other, and cannot be seen as either autonomous agents or subjects simply defined 'from above' or 'from below'.

There is a further problem that the synthesis around structure apparent in Keegan's *Colonial Order* highlights, when read in conjunction with works like that of Helen Bradford's 'Women, Gender and Colonialism'; the problem of gender-blindedness or 'androcentrism'. It is not good enough to argue that a

> general history would pay at least as much attention to the ruled as to the rulers, to women as to men. This book is preoccupied with structuring forces, with the forces of imperialism and colonialism, and less so with the peoples who experienced their effects. Thus it gives greater attention to the powerful than the powerless, the colonizers than the colonized, to men than to women. It might seem to some that the perspectives and worldviews of dominant actors are given privileged status over the experiences and perspectives of the victims and the powerless. I offer no excuses, as the investigation of structuring forces is of profound significance (Bradford 1996:viii).

Bradford has demonstrated just how different rule, power and structure might be analysed when the agencies and relations of gender are taken necessarily seriously.

A similar set of criticisms apply to Van Onselen's biography, despite Terry Ranger's (1997:384) praise of it as a 'landmark in African gender studies'[33]. Yes, there

[33] This is based on a very particular reading of gender—at least from his cursory comments in a brief review. Not only does it appear to equate gender with 'women', but also to equate successful gender studies with the presence of 'women' as 'rich and rounded categories' and as historical agents in this sense.

is discussion of 'family' and of 'women', but there is very little on masculinities, on sexualities and on gender that moves beyond the descriptive, or the silence of memory and the acceptance of particular forms of agency as representative of 'how it was' for women. Hofmeyr's work is very different. The important focus on gendered aspects of space, storytelling and intellectual traditions are just part of a much wider frame of engagement with the agencies of gender in her work. In the process agency becomes visibly more problematic, part of the necessary trouble of place and the politics of identity. However, as Bradford and others (e.g. Bozzoli; Mager; Van Der Spuy; Marks; Manicom) have argued, and despite significant historiographical interventions that have demonstrated the importance of these agencies and structures of gender relations, South African social history remains markedly androcentric in many respects.

the retreat to examining 'whiteness'

Captured under a broad sense of retreat, a growing number of white historians have in the 1990s increasingly focused on the theme of 'whiteness'. This has a number of dimensions. In the first place, it was a theme to which early revisionism drew attention:

> White society has its own history of military conquest and class struggle, and essential to the class project of leading white classes—farmers, mine owners and industrialists—has been the establishment of a consensus which overcomes these. Their common whiteness and prejudice against blacks, though it has clear historical and objective roots, is also an ideological and cultural form which has had to be forged and fought for (Bozzoli 1983:19).

Equally, it represents a defensive response to more recent developments. One aspect, reflected in critiques by a range of black intellectuals and academics, has related to the question of who speaks for whom and that 'Africans need to be able to speak for themselves'[34]. The failure to reflect on and rethink the implications of the practice of history by predominantly white historians and the associated ways many inherently reproduce and/or are accused of reproducing the power relations in the larger society in their practices and methods of research 'from below' has facilitated this retreat. It seems safer to have white subjects as objects of study, then to negotiate the varying forms of power and knowledge production that are currently so visibly racialised.

Others, faced with the politics of reconciliation and a perceived decline in radicalism in the period of transition have interpreted ideas of 'forgetting the past'[35] to mean a shift away from explicitly political history and the necessary audiences this entailed. Put differently, the 1980s politics of history, of the mission of popularisation,

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[34] This was a theme which surfaced at the Natal gender conference in 1991. See also Leroke (1994).

[35] N. Mandela (in *Mayibuye* Interview 1995).

has given way in some circles to a more cultural and introspective historical engagement within the relative security of 'whiteness'.

Thirdly there has been the influence of post-colonial studies, read in a relatively narrow sense as a space for the re-engagement with the pasts of colonial and racial South Africa, and particularly with the ways that racial ideas of dominance were formed, articulated and disrupted. This has meant, in some instances, a relatively unimaginative focus on the agents and agencies of white rule and racial discourses, without any conscious dealing with the construction of the 'whiteness' of such agents[36].

Strikingly absent from this recent work, in fact, has been attention to the questions of 'whiteness': as race and as social construction. Few studies have sought to unravel the very raced hierarchies of whiteness. To speak of 'whiteness' in this sense means more than just a focus on race or on how white people thought of their relationships with black people or men, for example. It rather refers 'to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination'. Naming whiteness should also displace it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of dominance:

> Among the effects on white people both of race privilege and of the dominance of whiteness are their seeming normativity, their structured invisibility (Fine *et al* 1996:viii).

This is so because whiteness has come to be more than itself: it appears to embody objectivity, normality, truth, knowledge, merit, motivation, achievement and trustworthiness, it accumulates invisible supports that contribute unacknowledged to the already accumulated and bolstered capital of whiteness. These contexts are not being systematically explored within this move to 'whiteness' by South African historians—or only to a limited degree and in very particular circumstances, mostly implicitly, and read through a binary opposition to 'blackness'.

Among the work that has moved in this direction is that on the construction of Afrikaner nationalism, particularly that focussing on women (although here the emphasis is on 'Afrikanerness' rather than 'whiteness'), by Dan O'Meara, Isabel Hofmeyr, Elsabe Brink, Marijke du Toit; work on the critique of liberalism by Paul Rich; on aspects of colonialism and liberalism by Clifton Crais; Tim Keegan, Andrew Bank; and on the mechanics of apartheid by Aletta Norval. What is especially lacking is systematic examination of the history of the construction of 'whiteness' among English-speaking whites. Clive Derby-Lewis, murderer of Chris Hani, for example, was involved with the Stallard Foundation—named after the infamous Col Stallard, the SAP member who chaired the 1922 Transvaal Local Government Commission which proclaimed that black presence could be tolerated in the towns only to serve the needs of

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[36] This was the case, for example, with a number of the papers at the UWC conference on gender and colonialism, January 1997.

whites. Stallard, an MP from 1929 to 1948 and leader of the Dominion Party between 1933 and 1939, was a graduate of Oxford and a pillar of the church: a

> Victorian in the best sense of the word. As soldier, lawyer, politician, patriot and statesman he maintained a rigid code of life in which strict discipline and integrity were dominant features[37].

What examination of this white masculine—WASP—tradition has thus far been made by today's male WASP historians?

where are the black historians?

In their analysis of the tradition of radical history, Bozzoli and Delius (1990:16) comment that 'black historians and social scientists have been few in number'. They blame this largely on the 'miserly and ideologically loaded provisions of black education', including the 'tribal colleges' where conservative Afrikaner historians exerted a stultifying influence. They point out also that black intellectuals have to some extent been excluded from libraries and archives, and inhibited from publishing:

> This stultifying context helped ensure that the genres of autobiography, fiction, journalism, photography and historical fiction have been the most common means through which the black intelligentsia has found its voice.

Writing in 1990, they however conclude optimistically that '[w]ithin the next decade, it seems certain that the racial composition of South African historians will undergo a marked change'[38].

From the perspective of 1997, it seems that they were unduly optimistic. While there may be more black postgraduate history students, the numbers of black history staff members at universities does not seem to have altered dramatically. Surveying the country, what one notices more than anything is an *absence* of black historians. Why is this? Specifically, how far does this fact remain a product of white

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[37] A quote from Harry Lawrence in an obituary to Stallard, *Argus* 14/6/1971. See also *Argus* 21/5/1971; 13/7/1971; *Die Burger* 5/6/1971; 14/6/1971; *Cape Times* 14/6/1971. Born in 1871, he arrived in South Africa with the military in the South African war of 1899-1902 and remained. In the 1960s he was 'still using a high-backed tin sitz bath brought into the rondavel bedroom on his farm Hopewoolith at dawn by a retainer bringing 4 cans of tepid water and the colonel's tea'. In view of this his reported comment is interesting: 'Civilisation is not something turned on like hot water from a tap'. Shortly before his death *Die Burger* reported that he was 'bitter teleurgesteld oor die verval van die Britse Ryk, wat hy toegeskryf het aan Harold Wilson en die feministiese beweging' (he was bitterly disappointed over the collapse of the British Empire, which he attributed to Harold Wilson and the feminist movement) [!].

[38] For other comments on the absence of black historians see, for example Freund (1988/1999), Worger (1991), and Rousseau (1994:Ch 3).

racism? Mahmood Mamdani (1997), reviewing William Makgoba's book on Wits, writes:

> a colonial power does not easily tolerate the development of a native intelligentsia ... Post-apartheid South Africa ... has a vibrant *native* intelligentsia, but that intelligentsia is, in the main, not to be found in the academy. Conversely, the university is one of the most racialised institutions in South African society—as racialised as big business. The only difference is that while big business is sensitive to this fact, universities are not. The university is proud of its exclusivity, considering it an inevitable consequence of the pursuit of excellence.

Do there remain pressures to exclude black historians from the academy?

On the other hand, to what extent is it a matter of choices. Historically, for whites, a career in the university has offered far fewer rewards than in business (or the civil service): it has been a case of 'madness' (or having an axe to grind) that has created white academics. Equally, for the black graduate in post-apartheid society the opportunities in business offer far greater rewards. Beyond that, activists of the 1980s, seeking to 'serve the community', find more productive outlets in national, provincial, or local government. At UWC we find the best third year history students tend to move to development studies to do honours. Two anecdotes. A postgraduate history student at UWC was interested in doing his M.A. on the reasons for the paucity of black historians. In 1995 he was elected to the Tygerberg council from Khayelitsha. He has become a statistic for his own undone research!! Even closer to home, a vocal participant in the seminar to which these papers were initially given, black historian Tshidiso Moloka, has left UCT to become an adviser to Gauteng premier Motshekga.

To evaluate reasons for the absence of black historians one would need in the first place to establish the postgraduate pool from which black history staff could have been recruited and then discover the reasons why they have not been. Over the 1980s, for example, there have been several black interviewers associated with the Oral History project at the University of the Witwatersrand, yet they have not continued in history. One wonders why not[39]. Even such a survey would not be sufficient. There are the questions of how the postgraduate pool is selected and how it selects itself.

One wonders, too, how far it is the syndrome of the 'uncompleted revolution'—the lack of radical change in the face of the expectations of radical change. In the 1960s and 1970s black South African social scientists such as Archie Mafeje (1971; 1988) and Ben Magubane (1971) had a project: combating colonialist notions of 'tribalism' and 'pluralism'. Where is the equivalent project today? There appear to be very few black historians championing a nationalist rewriting of South African history. Where are the historiographic equivalents of such 'Africanists' as Thami Mazwai (in journalism) or Mzi Khumalo (in business)?

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[39] On these issues see for example, Nkomo (1994) and Rassool (1997).

A cursory survey of papers to the recent *SAHS* conference in Pretoria (July 1997) reveals 15 and a half (one joint) papers by blacks, out of 66 delivered (23,5%)—probably higher than has been the case in the past[40]. The titles—we have not seen the papers themselves—suggest detailed localised studies rather than significant reinterpretations. In the Western Cape, a significant pole of attraction for black historians (and social scientists more generally) appears to be the reinterpretation of coloured identity, though others have also turned away from nationalist as equally from social history to pursue topics such as medical history, the study of representations and biography.

the new official public history

If there has been any 'break' in the production of history since 1994, it has been in the public sphere. This has broadly entailed two seemingly contradictory processes. On the one hand there is the relative silencing of history, perhaps more particularly social history, in the schools as the result of Curriculum 2005 which dissolves history into the 'Human and Social Sciences Learning Area' for grades 1-9. On the other hand, there is the presentation of a 'new history' in such institutional presences as the TRC or the Robben Island Museum. Simultaneously this 'new history' has also become visible in the growth of political biography in a range of forms, including that of television. Yet the one major television attempt to produce a comprehensive visual history of South Africa, in 26 one-hour episodes, with significant revisionist input, by a company called Pula, collapsed, apparently sabotaged by a black nationalist reaction[41].

We will mainly focus here on aspects of the drama of the TRC and on the moment of the opening of the Robben Island Museum in order to illustrate our argument. The TRC has been seen to reflect a massive official recording of counter-memories to apartheid silencing for the first time. This apparent new history generated through the TRC relies primarily on personal memory and the telling of remembrance to counter what are seen as official and documentary 'black holes' in South African history. The TRC is therefore seen to be a vehicle for the new histories and everyday stories of ordinary South Africans to be told, of revealing new pasts, submerged underneath systemic racism and apartheid.

The TRC's public relationship to the past has been complex and changing over time in the period of its existence. It is itself seen as a historical event or series of changing events, and has unfolded around dramatic hearings which mark these differences and changes over time. At the same time the TRC has also been periodically identified as a significant producer of new South African official and public histories.

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[40] Even so, the total number of papers given is certainly lower than at the previous conference at Rhodes.

[41] See Memo from Phil Bonner and André Odendaal to Historical Consultants for Pula Film history, 10/8/1995; 'Urgent need for revision of history', *Saturday Argus* 26/8/1995.

The TRC thus constitutes a moment and a space where the field of history appears to be open to reinterpretation and meaning. Clearly the TRC has many different parts with different meanings and implications for history production. Giving testimony and participating in the public space of the hearings does provide a profound sense of 'giving voice' to previously marginal and silenced accounts of the apartheid past. In important respects these activities elevate subaltern accounts into those of society as a whole. These accounts then have the potential to break down divisions between subaltern and elite accounts, particularly where those divisions are drawn in racial terms. In this sense the TRC served to directly open up public historical discourse to members of formally oppressed communities in ways that also move beyond the institutional sites of professional historical production.

The official collection of personal testimony within the TRC also provides for the construction of a national archive of subaltern experience on a scale that is enormously significant for the future production of history. Here people have spoken about their own historical initiatives and meanings as active historical agents in a past that will potentially attain the fullness of a national history. Official, public and academic relationships to this archive and understandings of this national history will however vary.

At the outset of the TRC, the media depicted the TRC as performing the larger role of new national and subaltern historian. 'From the outset, the principal aim of the commission has been to unearth South Africa's hidden history during the three decades which followed the banning of the liberation movements', said *Business Day*. Other newspapers produced similar interpretations. The TRC, they claimed would now 'tell the whole story' in the 'search for truth' by incorporating previously 'silenced voices'. This would open up the rewriting of South African history in ways which will 'set [ordinary black people] free from the prisons of uncertainty in which the ghastly events of the past have confined them for too long'. The TRC at the outset, then, was seen to represent

> South Africa's real history ... it's most important look at the past painful 50 years ... [f]or the first time, all South Africa has the opportunity to learn the uncensored truth about its history[42].

Through its collection of testimony at the various hearings around the country, history was being primarily rewritten through 'devastating testimony', 'police brutality tales',

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[42] *Business Day* 12/4/1996, 6/5/1996; *City Press* 6/5/1996; *Mail and Guardian* 10-16/5/1996; *Argus* 4-5/5/1996; *Sunday Times* 5/5/1996; *Sunday Independent* 5/5/1996; *Sowetan* 10-16/5/1996, for example. Radio broadcasts on SAFM provided extensive coverage of the TRC, using a broadly similar framework of hidden, ordinary, real and new, often with inserted voices to give the feel of this register—one which is reproduced as well in the daily live broadcasts on Radio 2000.

'speaking the unspeakable', through ordinary words. The range of codes and moods is unusually explicit and connective in these accounts: hidden, ordinary, oral, marginal, real, objective and 'new'—told and heard for the first time. There is more than an ironic echo here to the explanations of social history 'from below', but in a way which simultaneously ignores the existing contributions of this social historiography to having already detailed important aspects of this so-called hidden history. Instead the public and official spaces of the TRC are represented as the key sites for the emergence of this new history at this time.

This early representation of the TRC hearings and activities as the new 'real' and 'hidden' history, though, also needs to be qualified in various ways. The TRC itself, has explicitly argued it will be 'writing a history of a certain kind' which was to 'capture the perspectival nuances of the drama [of human rights violations]' in as 'comprehensive an account as possible'[43]. The TRC's framework is the period 1960-1994 and its focus, then, is not simply the entire past of this period, but to obtain

> as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed during the period ... emanating from the conflicts of the past[44].

This 'history of a certain kind' is also influenced by the concern to 'promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past'[45]. This meant that the TRC accounts of the past would need to acknowledge '... some kind of compromise between those who want amnesia—to forget the past—and those who are saying "let us have revenge, retribution"'[46]. All these are constraints on the TRC's mode of representation of the past.

Over the period of the TRC's existence there have been a range of further contests which have influenced a range of changing focuses of attention from within the TRC, imposing further such constraints. These have involved families of victims, perpetrators, political parties, legal and judicial challenges and 'outsider' critiques and refusals of active participation in the process. The shift of TRC and public attention from victim to amnesty hearings, recently highlighted by the Winnie Mandela and PW Botha cases, has also meant a shift from ordinary narratives of the past to more legal, interrogative and statist 'top-down' accounts which are increasingly concerned with conspiracy, silence and evasion about the past. This seems a far call from the initial media conceptions which celebrated hidden histories of ordinary people telling the whole story.

More particularly for our concern here, this means that the potential official

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[43] Charles Villa-Vicencio, Director of Research at TRC Workshop, UWC, 3 April 1996.
[44] Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, *Government Gazette* 26 July (1995) 2.
[45] *TRC Regional Workshops Document* nd:1.
[46] Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *Weekend Argus* 20/21 January (1996).

version of framing and constructing a new national history from within the TRC is open to very different versions and subject to a range of interpretations and possibilities. Despite these tensions and focuses, however, the TRC has continued to be identified as a key official site and publicly represented body which will frame and construct a new national history. The history of the TRC and the versions of history presented within the TRC are multilayered as much they are unfinished. It is therefore appropriate, in this context, to suggest that the TRC enables two further contradictory processes to become apparent. On the one hand it already provides a moment, or series of moments from the public outside, when we can rather

> hold up to view the always ambiguous and always incomplete relationship among sites and moments of production of historical knowledge, the sites, events and experiences represented in that knowledge, and the texts whereby those productions of knowledge become available to inspection (Cohen 1994:xxii).

But, and this is a significant qualifier, the forms of official and public history-making being articulated through and around the TRC, and in other arenas of public history around museums, monuments, heritage and tourism, as exemplified by the Robben Island Museum, for example, simultaneously *appear* to be much less about these ambiguities, hesitancies and range of sites and productions. Here, the face of history continues to appear as much more narrow, more contained and more directed into the particular domains of re-fashioning modernity, narrating the new nation, re-writing the past as reconciliation and re-defining citizenship. What might this version of the past look like?

Consider the recent opening of the Robben Island Museum on Heritage Day. The dominant image was one of an address by Mandela against the backdrop of five faces from left to right: Govan Mbeki, Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Robert Sobukwe and Walter Sisulu. The *Cape Times* caption accompanying the photograph (which was also the dominant television image) read:

> Shaped in Struggle: Let us recommit ourselves to the ideals in our Constitution—ideals which were shaped in the struggles here on Robben Island and in the greater prison which was apartheid.

Linked to the image were two headlines: 'Stop Depicting our People as Lesser Beings' and 'Mandela slams racist museums'. The official report, though, despite these headlines, had a more muted message—that 'with democracy [Mandela said] we have the opportunity to ensure that our institutions reflect history in a way that respects the heritage of all citizens'[47].

[47] *Cape Times* 25 September (1997). TV coverage, 24 September 1997.

During the years of apartheid, Mandela continued, 'people responded to the denial and distortion of their heritage with their own affirmation—as indeed Afrikaners had done in an earlier period'; others worked 'the history of their communities into everyday artefacts'; others celebrated 'their heritage outside of the country's museums and monuments, in song and in ceremony, in festivals and in carnivals, in the selling of their wares and in buying items associated with their heritage'. Here, history as heritage was apparently cleansed of the history of resistance, in the words of the primary symbol of resistance in South Africa! Elsewhere local historians sought to insert 'their history' into the new Robben Island Museum. The District Six Museum, representing 'all the people who experienced forced removals' drew out 'the strands of our heritage' by tracing ex-District Six residents who had been imprisoned or associated with the Island as part 'of the same story' of Robben Island being nationally imagined on Heritage Day. Still elsewhere, in the Castle, various symbols and reflections of the colonial past, which visually could have been mistaken for the meeting of the dioramas of the Natural History and the Cultural History Museums (from the uniforms of civilized violence to the eroticised nakedness of tribe) took place in a spirit of 'our multicultural and multilingual society'[48]. These traditional, pre-new South Africa, apartheid South African images of the past thus became visibly and publicly part of the way that the Robben Island Museum could 'respect the heritage of all our citizens' (as Mandela said).

Of course, there are multiple strands to these depictions: we wish to emphasise only a few here. The claiming of the heritage of Robben Island as the 'prison of apartheid' under the watchful gaze of an elderly male leadership is significant. Its portrayal of national figures of resistance and of symbolic leadership as being a relationship between men in nationalism traces a particular fictive map of the new nation. Under the custodianship of this experienced leadership, representing and standing up for 'the people' in the 'prison of apartheid', a model is provided to 'shrug off the chains of the past'[49] and to embrace the heritage of citizenship on an equal footing, 'not as lesser human beings'[50]. At the same time the violence of apartheid, as symbolised most dramatically by Steve Biko[51], is presented as part of collective experience of the five men: they know (and knew) and they symbolise the brutality of the apartheid past and resistance to it. The fact that Biko was never imprisoned on the

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[48] *Cape Times* and *Cape Argus* 24,25 September (1997); Television coverage 24 September 1997.

[49] A. Odendaal, Interim Director of the RIM, *Cape Times* 24 September (1997).

[50] Nelson Mandela in his Heritage Day speech at the opening of the Robben Island Museum, *Cape Times* 25 September (1997).

[51] Steve Biko was also symbolically important in representing the violence of apartheid through the almost simultaneous TRC amnesty hearings detailing his torture and murder at the time; as well as when taken together with his also current public memorialisation in the Eastern Cape as such a symbol.

Island, or that Biko and Sobukwe represent different political traditions, is forgotten through the promotion of this kind of national unity. It is a unity, a national re-interpretation and national agency framed by national reconciliation. This version of past and heritage of struggle lays emphasis on perpetrators and victims in the prison of apartheid, and draws lines between good and evil as symbolically contained and 'experienced' in the new figures of power. The leaders are/do represent the people/ the majority, their experiences those of the majority, their prison that of apartheid, and their sense of the forgiven past and reconciled present encapsulating the 'new democracy' and as the markers of citizenship and the new nation.

At the same time it is these official knowledges and memorialisations—in a new sense of occupancy and definition of 'the public'—that are being marked as the 'real' place of 'black history' as against 'the kind of heritage that glorified mainly white and colonial history'[52]. In this respect, this public history speaks for the 'innocent majority, unable to speak English and unversed in the language of politics'[53] as well as for the histories and participants in apartheid resistance and conflict. It is a history reliant much more on a public rewriting than it is on an academic one. And this is so despite the role of such key institutions as the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture. Set up to focus on 'all aspects of apartheid, resistance, social life and culture in South Africa' at the University of the Western Cape in 1991, and incorporating the visual and archival holdings of IDAF (International Defence and Aid Fund), it has subsequently played a central role in the planning and implementation of the Robben Island Museum as well as in various formats of historical production in the 'new' South Africa[54]. This production, though meant to focus on hidden histories, and recover hidden pasts of resistance and subaltern agency, has tended to disavow academic history production as marginal and to significantly facilitate the generation of a new official national history along the lines elaborated above.

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[52] Nelson Mandela, Heritage Day speech, *Cape Times* 25 September (1997).

[53] The phrase is taken from a TRC hearing report, *Argus* 4-5 May (1996).

[54] *On Campus*, UWC, Vol 3, No 19, 21-27 July (1995); Mayibuye Centre *Annual Reports* 1995; 1996. See in particular Rassool (1997a:5-7) for a critical context.

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