



South African Historiography (Pt. 1)

Week Eleven Lectures



The "Liberal" School in South African Historiography

- First, it is important to understand the origins of "Cape Liberalism", which refers to a group of White, often English-speaking, religious individuals from Cape Town and its surroundings, who (since the 1830s), have advocated for the ending of slavery in the Cape and violence towards Black South Africans.
 - This was often a "sympathetic" view of Black South Africans, often inspired by European Enlightenment thinking. This view rarely was shared by Afrikaners, as well as some English in the Eastern Cape.
- By and large, the "Liberal" historiographical school (emerging in the 1920s), was dominated by South Africans of English descent, and many of them saw the problems of society as resulting from the Racism of the Afrikaner, rather than South African socio-political, and economic conditions.
- Nevertheless, this was a major breakthrough from the colonial-apologist and Eurocentric "great-man" histories of the previous decades.

The "Liberal" School in South African Historiography

- First and foremost, the Liberal school saw the history of South Africa as comprising the history of **all** of its people, White and Black. This was a real breakthrough, compared to earlier writing.
 - Some of the main practitioners of the Liberal school were W.M. MacMillan, C.W. de Kiewiet, Eric Walker, and even some Afrikaans historians, such as J.S. Marais. It also inspired some early black South African writers, such as Sol Plaatje and D.D.T. Jabavu.
- Central to many of the writings of the Liberal school is the problem of race-relations. Most saw racism as not just a present trouble in South Africa, but a trouble that will only get worse.
 - Much of their writings deal with exploring the socio-political history of race relations in the territory.
 - A common theme in Liberal Historical writing since the 1920s is that the problems of South Africa have their origins in the racism of the frontier Afrikaans-speaking population and their governments, not the British. They see racism as a twisted form of ideology, which education can oust. They don't fully appreciate the economic place of racism in South Africa.

The "Radical" School in South African Historiography

- From the late 1960s, and especially in the 1970s and 1980s, these "Liberal" ideas were challenged by a group of "radical" historians, who saw segregation as an issue just the same as the liberals, but they saw the racial policies of South Africa as intertwined in a specific kind of colonial capitalism.
 - They saw the race question in South Africa through a "class" lens. This was usually a Materialist and Marxist lens.
 - While these were indeed scholars, they were most accurately described as "scholar activists", and most were not allowed to have academic positions in South Africa, at least until the 1980s. Many identified directly with the ANC, and a number of them tried to direct their scholarship towards the liberation movement.
- Some of these scholars were Jack Simons, author of *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*, Shula Marks (a historian of the Zulu), Anthony Atmore (a radical historian of the British Empire), Stanley Trapido (a radical scholar of South African Agriculture), and others.

The "Radical" School in South African Historiography

- By the 1970s, things started to change even faster. The "Radical" School entered its second phase with the scholarship of a group of British- and American-trained South African Historians who specifically were addressing the intertwined nature of race and capitalism. This was particularly present in the work of Harold Wolpe (who we will read next week), and Martin Legassick.
 - Crucial to their writings was the fact that South African capitalism was capitalism of a special kind, and also just capitalism. Allow me to explain. Many of the Liberal School scholars held that racism and economic progress were incompatible, and that market forces will *naturally* wither away racist sentiments and practices. According to the liberals, racism was unprofitable at its core. The Radicals actually saw apartheid and segregation as methods to increase the profit margins of businesses, factories and farms, and that there is no reason to believe that capitalism and racism are incompatible.
 - This radical view is most prevalent in the writings of Wolpe on African Reserves/homelands, and he utilized a Marxist framework (based on Meillassoux) to do so.

The "Wits" School of South African Social History

- In 1977, at the height of the Marxist challenge to South African historiography, a number of scholars at the University of the Witwatersrand founded the Wits History Workshop (WHW), an interdisciplinary project to look into the social history of South Africa from a more inclusive point of view.
 - The WHW people, notably Deborah Posel, Peter Delius, Philip Bonner, Belinda Bozzoli, William Beinart, Charles van Onselen, and others, rejected some of the theoretical tenets a number of the Radical school held. While they were not so against studying class and understanding the economic implications of segregation and racism, they didn't necessarily hold to a Marxist understanding of class.
- The WHW was much more loose than the radicals. They merely wanted to conduct histories "from below", this sometimes was merely building on the shoulders of the Liberal Historians, but with the subject of "humanizing" black South Africans.

The "Wits" School of South African Social History

- According to Delius, "One of the key conclusions that emerged from my own work was the danger of creating units of study blinkered by distinctions between urban and rural life that underplayed the constant interplay between town and countryside. Most of us agreed that the increasing separation of the black population from the means of production was a process of fundamental importance. But few were confident that any concept of class provided the primary analytical category or could capture the complex processes of struggle and change." (p. 16)
 - In a lot of ways, the WHW was trying to build a middle ground in between the Radical and the Liberal schools of thought. They rejected the Liberal school's wholehearted emphasis on racism as simply ideology (and particularly Afrikaner ideology), but they also rejected the Radical school's dogmatic adherence to Marxism and Marxist notions of class. Class was more loose to the WHW

The "Wits" School of South African Social History

- Furthermore, the WHW did quite a lot to unearth new histories of South Africa, especially of the poor and of Black South Africans.
 - Deborah Posel, *The making of apartheid, 1948-1961*, deals with urbanization and influx control.
 - Belinda Bozzoli's *Women of Phokeng* deals with oral history of Transvaal women's lives.
 - Charles van Onselen's *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia* deals with migration and daily life in mining compounds.
 - There are many others.
- Many of the Wits School were influenced by *The Making of the English Working Class*, by E.P. Thompson
- It is important to recognize that even after the end of apartheid, most of the WHW was white. This has to do with employment practices, as well as the nature of training in Social History departments overseas.
- Arguably, most of the South African History Departments today ascribe to WHW principles.

WHW and the Radical School compared

- Before we move into next week on Capitalism, which will be a big case study into the differing methods of the WHW and the Radical school, it is important to remember that part of the reason why the Radical school was so theoretical was that they were simply banned from South Africa.
 - Most were communists, and thus they had to conduct their studies from abroad or clandestinely.
- The WHW was not banned, the state did not feel so threatened by them.
 - Furthermore, by the late 1980s, it was easier to access archives and do social history research in South Africa than it was in the 1960s and 1970s.