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INTRODUCTION

ROBERT ROSS, ANNE KELK MAGER, AND BILL NASSON

Going back more than a century, it is the tradition of Cambridge Histories to provide synthetic and authoritative surveys of the history of various parts of the world. Their primary concern is to produce broad essays that cover a given field of history at any given point and that serve as a starting point for those who need to gain access to the established historical scholarship on a given country or field of inquiry. This volume in the history of South Africa seeks to maintain this approach. It represents a culmination of several decades of scholarship on the history of South Africa in the twentieth century, above all, that produced by so-called radical or revisionist historians and their successors since about 1970. In this period, South Africa and its past turned from being an international historiographical backwater into what was, at least temporarily, one of the most dynamic and innovative fields of African historical scholarship. That said, producing a synthesis of the present kind has offered particular scholarly challenges. In this introduction, we try to examine what those challenges represent and how this volume attempts to meet them, if not necessarily to resolve them.

As the second volume of this Cambridge series, we begin at the moment when the colonial conquest of South Africa was more or less completed and when the discovery of immense supplies of gold on the Witwatersrand in what was then the South African Republic, or Transvaal, lifted the agrarian economy of the region into a new industrial phase. Both events had enormous ramifications throughout the region that was to become the Union and later Republic of South Africa and neighbouring countries. We end in 1994, with the transition to majority rule democracy, after which the rules of political and social life changed dramatically.[1] The mid-1990s was also, largely coincidentally, the moment just before the devastating

[1] The final chapter of this volume does survey the historical scene post-1994 but only peripherally discusses broader political, social and economic developments.

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HIV/AIDS epidemic began to have a huge impact on mortality in South Africa.[2]

It goes almost without saying that this has in no way amounted to a simple or uniform history. South Africa has been cursed throughout its existence as a unit with an enormous level of internal diversity. Famously, or notoriously, it has a level of income inequality that today is rivalled only by that of Brazil. Its inhabitants speak eleven official languages and a number of others not recognised as such by the post-1994 constitution. For a long time, its own government refused to recognise its unity and to deny the vast majority of the population any claim on common citizenship within their own country. Politically, economically and socially, South Africa remains a country united in and by its exceptional diversity.

That heterogeneity has been reflected in the history that has been written about South Africa. What this volume attempts to do is to recognise and to reflect the immense variety of, and the contradictions inherent in, South African society. To be authoritative, as any Cambridge History should be, we have to be catholic in our approaches. Within certain limits, South African history should be inclusive – both in its range of subjects and in its treatment of them – in a way in which most of its proponents have had difficulty in doing. For the country's political divisions were, and have largely remained, reflected in the divisions in its historical profession. In being mindful of this, we are consciously setting ourselves against various historical approaches that propound 'master narratives' for the South African past and, implicitly, for its future.

Over the years, like prison sentences, a number of these narratives have run successively or concurrently through South African history. Each, in its own way, has reflected the political stance of those who have developed it and has naturally also been influenced by the sociology of the historical profession. In this respect, it is hardly surprising that the initial thrusts of South African historiography were defined in the context of white politics. In the first instance, therefore, the country's history since the 1880s was written in terms of the development of its constitution and on the place of South Africa as a new dominion in the British Empire. Matters such as the unification of the country and the terms of the franchise and the law were of consuming interest. It is by no means incidental that the previous *Cambridge History of South Africa* appeared as volume 8 of the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*.[3] This was, after all, the high point of the

[2] John Iliffe, *The African AIDS epidemic: a history* (Oxford: James Currey; Athens: Ohio University Press; Cape Town: Double Storey, 2006).

[3] Eric Walker (ed.), *Cambridge history of the British empire*, vol. 8, *South Africa, Rhodesia and the protectorates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936).

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liberal imperialist vision of South African history. It was a line of enquiry that probably reached its final moment with the early work of Leonard Thompson, although there have been a few attempts since then to incorporate South Africa into projects driven in the first instance by a concern for imperial history.[4]

The reaction to a historiographically dominant liberal imperialism came from two sides. One was, of course, Afrikaner nationalist historiography. Both in Stellenbosch in the Western Cape and in the Transvaal, particularly at the influential University of Pretoria, this came to be the presiding vision of the increasingly assertive Afrikaans-medium universities. Emerging Afrikaner nationalist historiography was particularly concerned with preindustrial matters, with the Cape colonial origins of an Afrikaner *volk*, with the Great Trek, and with the history of the Afrikaner republics. At the same time, it also had a close relationship with later Afrikaner politics and chronicled many of its organisational changes and adaptations, as could be seen, for instance, in the production of successive biographies of party leaders. The context of such nationalist writing was, it should be noted, at least as cosmopolitan as the country's Anglophone histories. But here the connections were to Germany and the Netherlands, rather than to Britain, and those were to atrophy (though never to disappear entirely) in the hardening years of apartheid.

The second development out of empire constitutionalism was a more full-blown English liberal historiography, concerned much less with the development of political institutions than with the historical potential for the establishment of a common and all-inclusive society in South Africa. This vision was first enunciated in the 1930s, by W. M. Macmillan, H. M. Robertson and C. W. de Kiewiet most notably,[5] primarily in opposition to segregationist ideas. These scholars began to bring issues such as the development of migrant labour and the growth of poverty into the orbit of historical enquiry, and to contrast economic integration with social and political segregation. As a consistent indictment of what it saw as the political and social injustice and economic irrationality of segregation and apartheid, in a general sense, liberal historical writing may

[4] Examples include John Darwin, *The empire project: the rise and fall of the British world system, 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); James Belich, *Replenishing the earth: the settler revolution and the rise of the Anglo-world, 1783–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[5] Notably W. M. Macmillan, *Complex South Africa: an economic footnote to history* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930); H. M. Robertson, '150 years of economic contact between black and white', *South African Journal of Economics* 2 (1934), 381–425; 3 (1935), 3–25; C. W. de Kiewiet, *A history of South Africa: social and economic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941).

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be seen as something of a manifesto for a multiracial capitalist society built on individual rights. Major representative studies of liberal history in general, whether coauthored, such as the *Oxford History of South Africa*, or in the work of individual writers, such as Leonard Thompson's *History of South Africa*, all argue for the ideal of an integrated, market-order South Africa.[6]

Equally, in attempting to come to terms with the social consequences of landlessness, industrialisation and urbanisation, liberal scholarship pressed more than one perspective. Whereas in the interpretations of some earlier semihistorical writers such as Hobart Houghton in his 1964 *The South African Economy*, a liberal free market was the implicit future solvent of South Africa's historical tragedy,[7] later historically influenced work on social inequality and poverty associated with bodies such as the Study Project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society (SPROCAS) and the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU), identified with a more interventionist, social-democratic outlook on the country. Naturally, however soft or hard its centre, liberal writings remained an essentially oppositional historiography except for brief periods, even though it became dominant intellectually, at least in the English-medium university world.

That intellectual predominance in fact, remained the case through much of the apartheid period, at least until the outbreak of the most vehement of the debates in South African historiography – that known as the clash between the liberals and the radicals, or Marxists, from the later 1960s onward. This was an argument over historical analysis in which there were very significant differences between the various participants, both on the structure of South African history and society and on their political consequences. Yet what is remarkable, at least in retrospect, was the level of common ground between the opposing scholarly camps in this debate. Thus, both liberals and radicals accepted that the main historical process of the country was its economic integration and that over the previous century this had largely been completed. In other words, for both doctrinaire Marxists and doctrinaire liberals, in opposing and attempting to halt this integration, apartheid was a quixotic attempt to defy the trends of history. The real issue of contention, though, was whether capitalism profited from apartheid. On the one hand, there were those who argued vigorously that

[6] Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson (eds.), *Oxford history of South Africa*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, 1971); Leonard Thompson, *A history of South Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

[7] D. Hobart Houghton, *The South African economy*, 4th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

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apartheid was hindering the full development of capitalism and retarding economic growth, and consequently that the ending of apartheid would remove the brakes on what they saw as healthy competition in a colour-blind market. On the other hand, there were those, overwhelmingly Marxists, for whom apartheid was supporting South Africa's particular version of capitalism, and that conversely capitalism was benefiting from apartheid, so that the collapse of apartheid would in turn bring on the development of some form of socialist society.

Earlier, a more popular kind of radical historiography had already begun to emerge in the 1950s in the context of a rapidly changing political landscape. Beginning with the African National Congress–led Defiance Campaign in 1952, opposition to apartheid intensified as the Communist Party drew closer to the newly invigorated and radicalised ANC and trade union activity became more militant. A handful of activist intellectuals, following Eddie Roux's 1948 *Time Longer Than Rope*,[8] provided interpretations of South African history that drew on fundamental Marxist notions of class exploitation and oppression and offered a view of history as a progression away from capitalism toward a more egalitarian society. Almost two decades later, Mary Benson's history of African nationalism in South Africa, *The African Patriots*, written and published from political exile, contributed another chapter to the story of national history as that of a struggle against oppression.[9]

From the late 1970s, then virtually twenty years after the banning of the major African political organisations and the exodus of most of their leaders, institutional histories and activist biographies, located in, and contributing to, an ascending mood of resistance to apartheid, expanded the genre of struggle history. Benson's biography of ANC leader Nelson Mandela, Francis Meli's history of the ANC, and even Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall's commissioned 1980 book on the South African Congress of Trade Unions provided important, if circumscribed, accounts of the main liberation movement.[10] Alongside such works, Baruch Hirson's writings offered a critical, but no less partisan, account of the formal struggle against apartheid. Also to the left were the histories of segregation and the

[8] Edward Roux, *Time longer than rope: a history of the black man's struggle for freedom in South Africa* (London: Gollancz, 1948).

[9] Mary Benson, *The African patriots, the story of the African National Congress of South Africa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

[10] Mary Benson, *Nelson Mandela* (London: Panaf, 1980); Francis Meli, *South Africa belongs to us: a history of the ANC* (London: James Currey, 1989); Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall, *Organize or starve! The history of the South African Congress of Trade Unions* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980).

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colour bar crafted by intellectuals linked to the Unity Movement and its noncollaborationist political tradition.[11]

As embedded accounts, these histories were selective, often partisan and stilted and, to various degrees, ideologically driven. Most were profoundly limited, even homogenised, by the secretive, caucus-based politics of the three-way alliance among the exiled ANC, the Communist Party and the South African Congress of Trade Unions and the political imperative to maintain a version of unity in the liberation movement.

Though officially proscribed, exile-based histories were bolstered from inside the country by a slew of university Marxist postgraduate theses on aspects of trade union activity, women's organisation and local community political struggles, many of them doing the rounds as photocopied texts in the study groups that sprang up among activists, across the divides. Of possibly more lasting significance was the clutch of activist autobiographies, written by men and women who had been imprisoned, had taken up arms or who had fled the country. Also 'speaking from below', black (auto)biographical and fictional writers sought to challenge oppression, to provide political role models and to celebrate lives sacrificed in the service of liberation. Many of these authors avoided complexity and adopted instrumentalist notions of social engagement. Others, however, avoided submitting to political self-censorship. The autobiographical accounts of Emma Mashanini, Ellen Kuzwayo and Ann Marie Wolpe, for example, sought to demonstrate how the personal interfaced with the political, laying bare the turbulence and ambiguities of lives lived in the antiapartheid struggle.[12]

Unsurprisingly, Marxist political ways of knowing extended particularly to the labour movement where, from 1974, the *South African Labour Bulletin* provided a forum for thrashing out strategies and contributing to the notion of worker consciousness. Driven by powerful trade union leaders intent on forging a strategy most likely to lead to the victory of the working class, debate was often so heated and acrimonious that one journalist memorably likened the task of writing about trade union politics to scuba diving in a shark tank.[13] Although this public airing of views may have contributed to an uncompromising discussion of labour prospects for trade

[11] Notably *Yours for the union: class and community struggles in South Africa, 1930–1947* (London: Zed, 1989) and *A history of the left in South Africa: writings of Baruch Hirson* (London: Tauris, 2005).

[12] Ellen Kuzwayo, *Call me woman* (London: Women's Press, 1985); Emma Mashinini, *Strikes have followed me all my life: a South African autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Ann Marie Wolpe, *The long way home* (London: Virago, 1994).

[13] See Martin Plaut, 'Debates in a shark tank – the politics of South Africa's non-racial trade unions', *African Affairs* 91 (1992), 389–403n1.

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unions, it did not encourage the first chronicler of the Congress of South African Trade Unions to adopt a more reflective approach to writing the institution's history. Nor, it seems, was the legacy of debate detachable from its acrimonious tone. The history of the rifts and controversies in the labour movement and their effect on South African politics remains a challenge for labour historians. Moreover, labour history itself undoubtedly needs to move beyond the confines of studying organised labour movements and to pay more attention to questions such as the development of the labour process, whether in mining, industry, agriculture, or in the service sector – for the historical experience of labour encompasses far more than its organisational or unionised form.

One perspective that separates Marxist approaches from earlier liberal histories is the understanding of power as racial and class oppression and their conscious engagement with the meaning of *nonracial* in the struggle to overthrow apartheid. Yet, being fragile and contested, the idea of nonracialism was far from static. Thus, the notion was germane to the Communist Party and to the ANC-aligned trade unions that insisted on organising workers across apartheid colour lines. Equally, it was unacceptable to those unions and political organisations that believed that black workers were primary and had special needs. Moreover, for the ANC, nonracialism was wielded strategically, less a principle and often little more than a rhetorical expression as the movement drew in activists from the Black Consciousness Movement at the same time as it held on to its Communist Party allies. Eventually, the postapartheid constitution and its preamble provided a symbolic moment of triumph for the ideal of nonracialism, an idea that surely contributed to the creation of a South African 'miracle' whose history remains still only partly written. In that respect, one part of that notion of peaceful and consensual transition from an oppressive apartheid era of human rights abuse and the confiscation of rightful ownership of, or access to, resources, has been documented through probing investigations by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Land Claims Commission.

In a not-always-easy articulation with explicit Marxism was what has come to be known in South African historiography as radical history. Here, much of the important early debate took place outside of South Africa, particularly in the seminars organised in London by Shula Marks and around Stanley Trapido in Oxford. More broadly, both in the United Kingdom and among some of those South Africanists trained and working in the United States, the influence of work on tropical Africa was, for a rare moment, of considerable importance. There were also extensions from Britain (more so than from the United States) into such bodies as the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. The intellectual connections between Europe and South Africa have always been closer than

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might be imagined, just as the space for intellectual debate in the country was never closed off, as in some fully totalitarian regime. Radical history has been, for the most part, synonymous with social history or certainly that form in which the politics has been left in. Like other varieties of left-wing South African historiography, it was shaped by the usual daunting analytical challenges posed by the character of South African society. The terrain that came to be traversed by radical writings was dominated by brooding themes, notably, the complicated intersections of racial and class structures and consciousness, the nature of South African political economy and the shape of its capitalist order, the role played by the dominated black majority in the shaping of that system and the intrusive and authoritarian inclinations of the state. As already noted, the explicitly Marxist materialist scholarship of the 1970s tended to focus more on theoretically chunky questions such as the role of capital and the state or the reproduction of cheap migrant labour, drawing explicitly on classically Marxian concepts and terminology, such as the hegemony of capitalism as a system of social relations between the dominant and the dominated.

By contrast, radical history as social history evolved as a distinctive and different kind of interpretative strand. Granted, these studies were generally written in a Marxist ambience of class formation, consciousness and conflict. Yet the analytical lens adopted by the new social histories came to be that of a more mildly *marxisant* or no more than a notionally materialist approach to understanding of circumstances of South Africa's urban and rural past. If it is treated as a roughly coherent body of work, three further features can be seen as distinguishing the culture of social history. Although many of those who crafted it were doing so as critically engaged and oppositional intellectuals, their writings may have been activist but were rarely partisan, in the sense of providing an intellectual gloss to the struggles of this or that component of the liberation struggle. Second, although the concerns of this brand of radical history certainly responded to, and were shaped by, the pull of influential social, economic and political developments, such as the labour struggles of the earlier 1970s, it preserved and sustained an independent momentum and range of its own. Therefore, it is certainly true enough that the fact that urban black townships were crackling into flame over rent, transport and other municipal grievances by the end of the 1970s inspired some scholars to investigate housing crises and squatter struggles in the 1940s. Yet it is equally true that, at the same time, other social historians were continuing to write away on poor white woodcutters or African football or Indian hawkers.

Radical social history therefore displayed a broad common agenda. If its historical topics ran from pass law struggles to the popular cinema, these were not competing but complementary interests. In this respect, one

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significant lasting contribution of social history to South African historiography has been to make it more like the historiographies of other societies, developed or otherwise, as they had come to be written. For the past social experience of South Africans has, in some ways, mirrored those of people elsewhere, in which work and leisure have been connected and have found an important place alongside politics in the formation of consciousness and identity.

A further important element to be considered is the way in which some social history approaches came to be influenced by a new generation of feminist scholars, whose subversive perspective criticised conventional South African histories of all types – nationalist, liberal, Marxist – for having been almost exclusively concerned with the doings of men, be they white or black.[14] In this view, by inserting the history of female experience, and giving it due weight, not only could underlying inequalities and tensions between the sexes be defined and explained, so also could the oppressive roots of male domination be exposed. Thus, masculine rhetoric about shared struggles for emancipation from racial oppression could be undercut powerfully by the competing blade of gender analysis. Although some work on the experience of labouring life in factories and on farms or on the growth of unionisation incorporated women, what feminist historians brought to this historiography was an analytical focus that argued that, though women as workers were one thing, women as women were another.

These social history approaches reflected a wide range of currents, from studies of struggling peasant communities that embodied a streak of cultural Africanism to urban 'workerist' analyses of shop-floor organisation and culture, but what held them all together was an underlying preoccupation with human agency as the lever with which to prise open history from below. Drawing on the radical historical revisionism associated with the British History Workshop at Ruskin College, Oxford, and inspired especially by what might best be termed the non-Marxist materialism of the eminent British social historian E. P. Thompson, human agency and its encounter with other oppressive social forces became the core analytical lubricant of these new ways of understanding. The investigative focus fell on the small change of everyday friction, conflict and accommodation among a dense patchwork of classes, groups and communities. For radical social history, this was the ground across which the peculiar pattern of class, culture and ideology in South Africa was being determined.

[14] The most important early texts were Belinda Bozzoli, 'Marxism, feminism and South African studies', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 9 (1982), 99, 131–72; Cherryl Walker, *Women and resistance in South Africa* (London: Onyx, 1982).

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In this framework, scholars working from both documentary and oral sources set out to provide a depiction of the making of South Africa's disfigured world. Thus, the creation of household and community forms was shaped not only by the wants of industrial capitalists and urban planners but also by the needy exertions of working-class and other urban inhabitants. The long development of South Africa's system of labour migration could be understood properly if it were explored not simply as the manipulative imposition of capitalists but also as something to which rural migrants themselves had been contributing. Equally, the landscape of capitalism in large parts of the countryside had been created not through capitalising commercial farmers having had it all their own way, but through the modifying contributions of resisting labour tenants and sharecroppers.

Unpacking the meanings of consciousness in both urban and rural settings also became a key analytical theme, with scholars exploring their intricate connections with class, community and ethnicity to reveal the experiences and struggles of ordinary people in striving to make something for themselves in a world of oppressively structured reality. Here, numerous social historians, following the lead set in particular by Charles van Onselen in his essays on the early Witwatersrand,[15] analysed townships and other sites of community life as a web of classes, paying particular attention to the notion of class-based cultures, exhibited by a string of testimonies, oral biographies and recorded memories of past cultural pursuits. Cumulatively, this all suggested the construction of a robust and largely warmhearted notion of a social history of 'the people', but one in which straightforward national and racial expressions were likely to be superseded by competing identities resting on class and cultural sensibilities.

For quite some time in historical scholarship, it was the class rather than the cultural sensibilities that prevailed as a mode of explanation, and for several reasons. In part, the so-called cultural turn was slow to reach South African historiography.[16] Thus, the perspectives being fashioned by scholars whose background was in literary studies were barely acknowledged.[17]

[15] Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914*, 2 vols. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982).

[16] The main exception to this was Patrick Harries, *Work, culture, and identity: migrant laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860–1910* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; London: James Currey; Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994).

[17] Isabel Hofmeyr, '*We spend our years as a tale that is told': oral historical narrative in a South African chiefdom* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann; London: James Currey; Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1993); Elizabeth Gunner, 'Power house, prison house: an oral genre and its use in Isaiah Shembe's Nazareth Baptist Church', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14 (1987–1988), 204–27; Tim Couzens, *The new African: a study of the life and work of H. I. E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985).

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