

Book Feature

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Merle Lipton, *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists. Competing interpretations of South African History*

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A convincing argument

Merle Lipton is probably best known to historians as the author of *Capitalism and apartheid* (1985). She has in fact researched and written about a considerable range of South African issues. She co-edited two substantial volumes on policy questions: *Land, labour and livelihoods in rural South Africa* (1996) concludes more than two decades of work on South African agriculture, in particular small-scale black farming, while *State and market in post-apartheid South Africa* (1993) covers a wide range of economic policy issues.

Lipton also focused on what was being done (and not done) in the “Bantustans”, and produced a substantial memoir on the migrant labour system (Optima, 1980) after the major change in the international gold market during the 1970s. Her interest in international affairs led to a study of the possibility of international pressures, including sanctions, promoting change in South Africa. A number of these areas of focus contribute to the volume under review – as they did to *Capitalism and apartheid*.

Capitalism and apartheid traced the correspondence between components of the racial system and the economic interests of various classes in different sectors of the growing capitalist economy. It insisted however that class interests can change as technologies and markets change, and that the overall constellation of interests is affected by the changing sectoral balance in the economy. It also insisted that ethnic/racial factors could not be entirely reduced to class interests, and that to understand and predict *political* behaviour, both sets of determinants had to be considered in “close interaction” with each other. Lipton’s account was opposed to the view that the interests of capitalism as a whole required then – and would continue to require – the retention of racial subordination. In fact, she interpreted the period 1970-1984 as one of significant reform in which business had played a substantial role – both because of its changing interests and because the costs of maintaining apartheid were increasing. However, pro-reform capitalists were restrained by the political power of the ruling National Party.

This present volume is largely (though not entirely) concerned with similar issues, though it deals with them over a longer period, covering both pre-1910 and post-1984 South Africa. The book also has a historiographical dimension, examining the debates between, and comparing the analyses of, liberal, neo-Marxist/revisionist and (Afrikaner and African) nationalist historians.

An introductory chapter sets out the issues, highlights the links of history to recent political developments, and describes the book's structure. The first section (pp 7-47) deals with the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, before the construction of full-blown apartheid. Here Lipton focuses on liberal-versus-revisionist debates about the nature and origins of the "racial order", in particular whether liberal historians – as revisionists claimed – misunderstood that order as being largely without economic and material roots, and attributed it instead to the effects of slavery, frontier isolation and Afrikaner religion, rather than to the requirements of early capitalist development.

The second section (pp 47-106) comprises the core of the book, providing an analytic account of the post-1970 reforms, the ending of apartheid, and the transfer of power. Lipton's main thesis is that the "reforms were precipitated by domestic pressures within the oligarchy, of which the most effective came from business and the NP verligtes" (p 104). This account is "analytic", because liberal, neo-Marxist/revisionist and other interpretations of the process are compared, and an analysis is offered of the role of other major "reinforcing" forces such as pressures from trade unions, mass action, international sanctions and armed struggle.

The third section of the book (pp 107-136), rounds off the discussion from a current time-perspective. First, Lipton reflects on the debates and how they were constructed. This includes a discussion of the meaning of the "liberal" principles that have been under such attack, as well as an attempt to construct from the literature "a neo-Marxist revisionist model" and to tease out its implications. Lipton also has something to say about post-1994 political conflicts and how they relate to these historical debates.

A great deal is packed into this fairly short volume. Here I only have time to comment (for the most part favourably) on a limited number of issues. Lipton's main thesis, which relates to the reform-and-demise of apartheid period, highlights "domestic pressures within the oligarchy, of which the most effective came from business and the NP verligtes". A fuller statement does her overall argument more justice:

Thus apartheid was ended by an (unusual?) combination of reform from above and pressure from below, interacting with and reinforcing each other. Moreover, this domestic process occurred in an international context that, from the mid-1980s, pushed the contesting parties toward accommodation, rather than revolution or intensified repression" (p 105).

This seems to me entirely convincing, and carries the authority of her extensive fieldwork on the domestic scene and her familiarity with international developments.

I also find myself responding favourably to Lipton's efforts (especially in Chapter 5) to get to grips with theory – particularly her section on "assumptions about individual and social behaviour"(pp 115-118) – which has something to say about the nature of ethnic or racial identities and interactions in contexts such as we had, and continue to have, in South Africa. On the one hand, she judges that, analytically, the situation has sometimes been so complex that she is forced to reach for the concept of

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“overdetermination”: “racism in South Africa was overdetermined, with material security, ideological and status concerns reinforcing each other” (p 17) – a usage that appears again as the final process of reform begins (p 104). On the other hand, she refers briefly to recent work by writers such as Dennett, Pinker, Seabright and Putnam, which either suggest inherited (but educable) predispositions or provide comparative evidence about ethnic contact or ethnically-diverse societies. Surely more needs to be made of this issue. In a somewhat different conceptional idiom, Lipton made an attempt in *Capitalism and apartheid* in a section labelled “Class and ethnicity: a reformulation” (pp 373-376) to present an account of aspects of this problem. Perhaps she will attempt more in due course.

Lipton’s book covers a good deal. Perhaps some of the material in the last two chapters might have been pruned, but in general it is well-written and well-organized. The presentation facilitates study, with material often arranged as in a modern textbook, using summaries with numbered points, and type-size (in headings and sub-headings) varied in such a way as to show logical relations between sections.

Beyond all the virtues are some awkward questions. Lipton agrees (p.135) with the view of Ken Smith (1988) that there has been “an artificial division of historians into schools”; yet she feels the need to work with the “divisions” that have been established. “Nationalists” make it into the title of the volume, but, although she certainly discusses and refers to Afrikaner historians, and though there are some references to Magubane and others, a full integration of their work would have required a much larger (overwhelming?) task. Lipton notes an aspect of Giliomee’s work which she summarizes thus: “Apartheid, he argues, provided the political order essential for economic development and the establishment of a new state” (p 75). She then sketches how – using her approach – this task came to be abandoned as its costs “could no longer be shifted to others”. It would have been illuminating to have had more of such argument!

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