

Of Whiteness and Warring Springboks

Neil Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939-1961*

Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005

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As far as I know, Neil Roos' *Ordinary Springboks* is the first systematic attempt by a historian to apply the whiteness studies paradigm to an analysis of South African society.¹ Whiteness studies is a relatively new

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1. Roos notes that the history of whiteness remains a relatively under-researched field in the radical historiography of South Africa (p 4). This statement is equally true of all historiographical paradigms, but Roos' bibliography does not cite even the few extant works that frame their analysis in terms of the whiteness studies paradigm. These include Jonathan Hyslop's article "Why did Apartheid's Supporters Capitulate? 'Whiteness', Class and Consumption in Urban South Africa, 1985-1995", *Society in Transition*, 31, 1, 2000, that delineates changing white subjectivities during the period in which the apartheid edifice was dismantled. Another important intervention in the South African literature is Sarah Nuttall's "Subjectivities of Whiteness", *African Studies Review*, 24, 2, 2001, which focuses on constructions of whiteness in South African autobiographies and other personal narratives. Unlike Roos, Nuttall departs from US- (and British-) based studies of whiteness. The first work to employ this paradigm in a sustained fashion is Melissa Steyn's *Whiteness just isn't what it used to be: white identity in a changing South Africa* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 2001) that focuses on how whites have reinvented their identities during the post-

humanities subfield which first emerged in the USA. Employing a social constructionist approach to identity formation, it attempts to trace the economic and political history behind the invention of whiteness, to examine how whiteness functions in social practices, and to analyse the cultural practices that create and perpetuate whiteness. It follows, then, that if whiteness is not an immutable essence, but is historically produced, and if its production requires something more than the physical characteristic of skin colour, then whiteness as a form of political identification, if not racial identity, can be deconstructed and even abolished.² This imperative was frequently coupled with the defence of affirmative action and other race-based solutions to American social problems. Understandably, whiteness studies has been seen by some of its critics as race studies in a new guise, promoting the pursuit of a partisan political agenda. Nonetheless, it has been established in the American academy. If whiteness studies is still in its infancy in the USA, in South Africa it is in the gestation phase.

Roos reckons that his book “represents a historical materialist reading of whiteness in mid-twentieth century South Africa” (p 2). Presumably, this means that the construction of whiteness is to be understood primarily as a product of particular conjuncture of material circumstances. Roos borrows from the work of American labour historian David Roediger who emphasises the links between class formation and racial identity.³ Roediger asserts that proletarianisation and the systematic development of a sense of whiteness went hand in hand with the making of an American white working class. Similarly, Roos believes that in South Africa whiteness developed as the white working class responded to the fear of dependency on wage labour and to competition from their black counterparts. Thus class, race and whiteness proved mutually reinforcing. Roos supplements Roediger’s insights with those of another American scholar, David Goldberg, whose position is informed by Antonio Gramsci’s idea of hegemony. Whiteness is

1994 period of transition in which they effectively lost control of the state. There is no overview of the historiography of whiteness in South Africa, but Paul Maylam’s *South Africa’s Racial Past: The history and historiography of racism, segregation and apartheid* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2001) comes close to this – even if it is by default. Maylam uses the term whiteness in the sense of a racial identity (p 3), but he is primarily concerned to elaborate the historicity and historiography of the racial order, and understand white racism rather than the construction of whiteness *per se*.

2. R. Wiegman, “Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity”, *Boundary 2*, 26, 3, Autumn 1999, p 136.
3. D. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (Verso, New York, 1991).

positioned as the central characteristic of the hegemonic practice that Goldberg describes in his study of racist culture.⁴ Roos stresses Goldberg's distinction between racist culture and a culture that is racist. According to him, this is not mere semantics, but an important distinction to make. In the latter case, racism is consciously invoked by ideologues and other social actors, and serves an express political purpose. Racist culture, on the other hand, is deeply ingrained in discourse, cultural practice and meaning. Thus there is no generic racism; rather the "dominant modes of racialization" are historically and culturally constructed. Roos restates Goldberg's thesis as follows: "Although racist thinking and practice means that race is becoming increasingly normalised and naturalised through modernity, it is not simply and mechanically determined by social conditions at any particular time" (p 8). He thus frames his account of white (ex-) servicemen in terms of the hegemony of whiteness and the centrality of racist culture in wartime and post-war South Africa.

Roos draws on the abovementioned works in order to understand the racism of white South African men who volunteered to serve in the Union Defence Force (UDF) during the Second World War and of the war veterans. These white volunteers, or the "ordinary springboks" of his title, came mostly from the ranks of the white working class. Roos asserts that their history demonstrates that despite the fault lines of class and ethnicity, there was a general consensus among whites on the political, social and cultural primacy of whiteness (p 8). White dominance was taken for granted as whites agreed on the fundamental racial hierarchy of South African society. Whilst war service might have generated a set of common values and identity, there was contestation over white subjectivities amongst war veterans. The majority of (poor) white veterans believed that they were entitled to social advancement, greater status and security, in return for serving their country during the war. They defined social justice in exclusive or racial terms; it implied that their expectations for access to housing and "respectability" would be met by the Smuts government. On the other hand, a small group of radical white veterans invoked their war experiences and traditions of anti-fascism to challenge the very precepts of racialised South African society. For them, social justice was defined in non-racial terms; it included the extension of the rights of citizenship to all. The war had been fought (and won) to uphold principles of democracy and human rights.

4. D. Goldberg, *Racist Culture Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1993).

The timing of the publication of Roos' monograph did not allow him to engage meaningfully with the thesis propounded in a contemporaneous volume entitled *South Africa's 1940s*.⁵ In this work, the editors eschew the conventional wisdom that the shift of the white electorate to the right and the Nationalist Party (NP)'s assumption of power was an inevitable consequence of post-war conditions. Nor do they accept that the advent of the NP government necessarily signalled that a (more) racist, reactionary solution to South Africa's so-called "native problem" would follow. This standard version has it that the NP's apartheid pronouncements resonated with the electorate as it seemed to offer a firm and ready answer to growing white fears occasioned by the apparent failure of the United Party (UP) government to stem the tide of black urbanisation and the growing perception that segregation was irretrievably breaking down, as well as the radicalisation of extra-parliamentary [read: black] organisations. However, Saul Dubow and Shula Marks⁶ contend that the reformist impulses of the 1940s actually afforded South Africans "worlds of possibilities" to follow a different, more liberal path than the one embarked upon by the NP. Roos' treatment of the Army Education Scheme (AES), an adult education project established by white liberals for servicemen in the UDF during the war, might seem to support their viewpoint. Roos characterises this enlightened education project as representing a moment of idealism born of the wartime struggle against Nazism and fascism. He argues that the promoters and sponsors of the project – a small coterie of AES intellectuals – saw it as furthering the struggle for social justice and a better world. Was it however a moment of liberal optimism? No, not if the response of the soldiers to the project is anything to go by. The bigotry, prejudice and willingness of ordinary white troops to condone discrimination effectively amounted to the rejection of AES ideals of a more inclusive South African citizenship.

When Roos insists that ex-servicemen did not withdraw their support for the UP in the 1948 election despite the failure of the Smuts government to deliver on its promises to them, this might suggest that many white veterans still cherished hopes for a "brave new world". It

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5. S. Dubow and A. Jeeves (eds), *South Africa's 1940s Worlds of Possibilities* (Double Story, Cape Town, 2005). Roos' paper, "The Second World War, the Army Education Scheme and the 'Discipline' of the White Poor in South Africa", that was presented at the Southern African Research Centre Conference, Kingston, Canada, in September 2003 attempts to do so to some extent. This paper, which corresponds with parts of Chapter 4 of the volume being reviewed, was not selected for inclusion in *South Africa's 1940s*.
 6. Dubow & Jeeves, *South Africa's 1940s*, Introduction & Afterword, respectively.

might even be surmised that war veterans who rallied to the banner of the Torch Commando made a belated attempt to prise open a window of opportunity for resuscitating more liberal practices and policies in the face of increasing NP authoritarianism. This short-lived association challenged the unconstitutional tendencies of the NP, specifically its campaign to remove coloured voters from the Cape's common voter's roll in the early 1950s. Roos however shows that the Torch Commando was not only driven by its opposition to a one-party state, but was especially fearful of the loss of English language rights. Although it included both English- and Afrikaans-speaking veterans in its ranks, its form of whiteness rejected Afrikaner primacy (p 198). So to regard the Commando as a "late hurrah" of liberalism ignores the fact that political options were severely circumscribed by a racist culture and prevailing structural conditions. Before I am accused of being an unrehabilitated structuralist who downplays human agency, let me add that the country's leadership lacked both the imagination and the nerve to articulate a far-sighted vision for post-war South Africa. Consequently, there was little likelihood of wary voters embracing progressive reforms and social justice. Instead, they flocked to the white laager. In any event, it is my view that the window of opportunity for any white minority government to pursue a more liberal direction was well and truly closed by the late 1940s. Liberalism was a spent force in South African politics.⁷

Roos illustrates the range of white veterans' subjectivities and constructed identities with reference to the histories of two veterans' organisations, namely, the Springbok Legion and the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTH). Although there was a degree of overlapping membership between these organisations, they competed for the allegiances of rather different constituencies. The MOTH was an association that provided space for veterans to swap war stories and develop a sense of camaraderie. It also provided financial assistance for schemes that enabled veterans without the means to become homeowners. The MOTH projected itself as "apolitical". The Springbok Legion, by contrast, modelled itself as a "trade union of the ranks" and fought for wartime and post-war privileges for soldiers. It was committed to securing a "square deal" for veterans. The MOTH survived the demise of the Legion which alienated most veterans on account of its embrace of issues that were regarded as radical in a political climate that under the NP government became increasingly reactionary. The differentiated

7. See my paper "Revisiting Urban African Policy of the Smuts Government in the 1940s" presented at the Southern African Research Centre Conference, Kingston, Canada, in September 2003, <http://www.queensu.ca/sarc/Conferences/1940s/Baines.htm>, accessed 19 March 2007.

whiteness of these organisations suggests that while white supremacy might not have been negotiable, the boundaries of whiteness most certainly were. With the consolidation of the apartheid state, racist discourse became more prevalent and served to legitimate the new racial order. However, not all white ex-servicemen were racists, even though they lived with(in) South Africa's racist culture. In fact, a small number of veterans featured in the resistance to apartheid during the 1950s, and some drew upon their wartime training to become prominent figures in the armed struggle.

White racism is a concomitant, but not a necessary consequence of whiteness. Roos, however, frequently conflates these concepts. Notwithstanding such conceptual obfuscation, the author still makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the country's changing racial order and the development of South Africanism or an inclusive white nationalism from the time of South Africa's entry into the Second World War to the country's withdrawal from the British Commonwealth. Unlike much of the writing on the Second World War, *Ordinary Springboks* is not merely a tribute to white servicemen, nor was it simply conceived as a history of war veterans. Indeed, it grapples with broader issues that inform our understanding of the entire period. The narrative framework and the absence of jargon, even in the introduction which theorises racism, masculinity and whiteness, render the text accessible. In short, this book is a welcome addition to South African history and historiography.

Gary Baines
Department of History
Rhodes University