

A Clear and Uncluttered History of Racism in South Africa

Paul Maylam, *South Africa's Racial Past: The History and Historiography of Racism, Segregation and Apartheid*

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Race is one of the themes which has defined and shaped South African history. Indeed, the question of race has been a dominant and transnational factor in the modern world. Attempts to understand and define the concept have, however, largely been unsuccessful because, as postmodernists have maintained, race is not an objective fact, but rather “social fiction”. The comparative work of the American historian, George Frederickson, demonstrates the difficulties inherent in trying to get to grips with histories of racism.

Even though race has dominated much of the intellectual ground in South Africa, there has not been a work of synthesis which has sought to guide the debate. For readers, teachers and students, this has meant that the concept has remained somewhat ephemeral – in some cases even out of reach. Paul Maylam, professor of History at Rhodes University, has plugged this gaping hole in South African historiography and one should be grateful to him, for he has produced a clear and uncluttered history of racism in South Africa from pre-industrial times to the apartheid era.

As Maylam notes, racism (or colour prejudice) did not exist in the classical world where white/black relations were based on mutual understanding. After all, many ancient civilizations – the Egyptians and the Carthaginians, for instance – were not located in Europe. Mediaeval Africa also conducted a vigorous trade with European, Asian and Arab societies. Commerce and the market was a major factor determining people’s actions. Religion, on the other hand, served to divide. It was only over time that racist attitudes began to take hold and, as Maylam illustrates, to change according to circumstances. The idea of race, therefore, is a fairly recent construct.

Although some have seen the roots of South African segregation policy in the Netherlands, Maylam argues that the weight of evidence does not support this contention, as the Dutch never instituted a systematic system of racial classification. He also points to the anomalous situation that the first area to be colonised and to institute slavery, was also the seedbed of South African liberalism.

Maylam maintains that neither the South African frontier, nor slavery produced a racial order, as neither gave rise to “a coherent body of racial ideology or racial theory” (p 66). It is somewhat trite, but nonetheless worth repeating: myth is imbedded in South African history and in the psyche of South Africa’s peoples. Maylam interrogates the worn myth “which represents Boers/Afrikaners as the archetypal racists, to be contrasted with the supposedly more urbane, enlightened English-speakers” (p 66). Social Darwinism – the idea of the intellectual inferiority of the African races – was, of course, an import from Britain and as Maylam points out, the need for land, labour and security coupled with fear and competitiveness merely exacerbated deeply entrenched racist ideas. The mid-nineteenth century, therefore, was the crucial formative phase in the growth of the racist state and this was expressed most vividly in the Shepstonian system.

The racial factor in South African society became further entrenched as the long nineteenth century ground into the twentieth. Continuous war fought on the Eastern Frontier, in Zululand and Basutoland during the period 1877-1881, as Maylam notes, “aroused the colonial psyche, provoking racial consciousness” (p 128) which, according to him, was more important than mining as a factor in promoting racism. The argument is an interesting one and can be sustained on a number of fronts. The very conduct of war, for instance, is used to reinforce racial stereotypes and in the South African context, African methods of warfare were considered barbaric. Such stereotyping was entrenched by the frontier tradition of popular writing, as for instance in Stuart Cloete’s novel, *Turning Wheels* (1937).

This led to a fear of the “other”, who, as Maylam notes, “can be enemies, actual or potential, in war” (p 241). On the other hand, as Maylam also argues, fear of the “other” can be more deeply imbedded in the psyche to mean criminals, carriers of disease, competitors and so on. In this context, the race which has suffered most from a paranoid fear of the “other”, namely the San, needs to be explored in some depth.

One should not forget the importance of “economic forces and class interests” (p 120) in the creation of the racial order. The colour bar was created by white workers who feared that their privileged positions on the diamond mines would be compromised by the influx of cheap, unskilled black labour, a state of affairs welcomed by mining companies who wanted to keep production costs to a minimum. Industrialisation, as Maylam notes, led to the hardening of the racial order indeed, and ideas of racial difference and white superiority became more formalised.

The nexus between industrialisation and race was a product of fear – fear of losing jobs and status. Racism often manifests itself amongst the lower middle-class, people desperately trying to cling to their meagre gains in society and to maintain their precarious position in the hierarchy of life. Technological advancement amongst urbanised workers can be reasonably quick and once black workers had acquired the necessary skills, there was a real chance that they would pose a threat to white workers.

Racial ideology developed in tandem with the growth of black urbanisation, yet the answer, namely apartheid, was a huge contradiction. The idea to create separate racial entities, in essence mini-subject states (homelands), ignored the fact that cities would go on attracting increasing numbers of African workseekers. In any case, the introduction of Bantu education – an issue which Maylam might have touched on – was an attempt to create a class of poorly educated African workers who would service urban industries but whose loyalties would remain in the homelands. Inevitably, however, expectations would grow.

Maylam neatly weaves through the vast and complex literature on race in this compact and attractive study. It is to be hoped that this book will find a readership beyond the confines of academia so that South Africans are brought to an understanding of our racial past, a major factor which has bedevilled the history of this country. Nevertheless, I need to close on a negative note: few will be able to afford the price of this book and as yet there is no evidence that a local edition will be published.

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