

SOUTH AFRICA AS AN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY*

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Unlike European historians South Africans never seriously debated the quest for what should be the "true field" or "domain" of historical study or what method should be used for studying the past. It enjoyed the status of a self-evident, established science until the 1970's when Harrison Wright wrote about the "liberal-radical controversy" over Southern African history.¹

The science of history became internationalized after the Second World War, and the ideas of innovators from France, Britain and America reached South Africa through the work of radical authors in the 1970's. In the new intellectual climate questions like the following were asked: Upon what topics should South African historians focus? What avenues of research should prove most attractive? What methods would historians need to pursue their research options? How should new historians be trained? Some of the questions are now being investigated by the research team of the S.A. Historical Society.

Being aware of the pursuits of the "new" history in 1973, I published a brochure, *Urban History as area of research for the South African historian*², followed by a paper delivered to the South African Historical Society in 1979, "Tematiek en metodiek van die historiese industrialiseringsnavorsing", in which I advised: "A new type of thematics, a widening of our field of research and a broadened methodology are awaiting us in the field of industrialization research."³, to which Prof C. Saunders referred in his paper on "The historiography of Industrialisation" at this conference.

In the new intellectual climate historians became aware of the single most important historical factor which shaped the lives of ordinary people, namely industrialization. The fact that the call for papers on the theme, "South Africa as an industrial society", has been "overwhelming" - about 50 papers were presented - illustrates the new direction historiography has taken in this country. It is a daunting task to present a "wrap-up" because of the scope of the theme and the diverse nature of the contributions. The organizers however succeeded in bringing system to the subject and dividing it in such a way that the papers linked up logically. The comparative themes putting South African industrialization in a wider perspective, and reviewing the debate about the relationship between capitalism and Apartheid, was illuminating. They provided a background to individual themes like mining, working conditions, rural history, urbanisation, labour, industrial conflicts, banking, energy, transport, the social impact of industrialization, changing attitudes and mentalities and even the teaching of history, which I believe, needs our special attention.

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1. H.M. Wright, *The burden of the present* (Cape Town, 1977).
2. RAU: Publikasiereeks, Die geskiedenis van die Afrikaner aan die Rand, nr 3, Johannesburg 1973, 80 pp.
3. S.A. *Historiese Joernaal*, Nov. 1979, republished in F.A. van Jaarsveld, *Die evolusie van apartheid* (Kaapstad 1979), p. 136.

Enlargement in the scope of historical studies

What has become quite clear from the conference papers is that there has been a significant widening of the scope of historical studies, namely a shift of interest from the individual to the masses and thus the underlying structural changes which have transformed the lot of ordinary men and women. Formerly they lived outside the charmed circle of literacy. The range of approaches to the past has expanded with the maturing of social history, the coming of environmental studies and the history of collective mentalities. Social history, at first connected to cultural and economic history, has emancipated itself, becoming the most important single sub-discipline in the field of history and eventually ending up as the history of society in its broadest sense.

It is clear that there was a shift from political history - regarded by many historians of today as old-fashioned and outmoded - to socio-economic history. For many years the state and politics were the major themes of traditional historians. This conventional thematic was a legacy of the old type of historical studies which we inherited from the Ranke model of historical writing. Not that political history is dead and buried: it still remains a vital field, but it seems that it should ideally be intertwined with social and economic conditions, and incorporate sociological and anthropological concepts or patterns.

It is clear from the conference papers that historians have moved away from the individualizing approach to structural phenomena, from event-orientated history to social history, and from epic narration to theoretical explanatory models based on statistical or quantitative material. We have moved away from historical personalities to the ordinary masses in an industrialized society, that is, to super individual phenomena, and socio-economic structures and processes. Huizinga in 1941 became aware of the changing industrialized society and thus predicted that the traditional historian will eventually have to abandon the epic and dramatic narration and accept a change of form in historical re-creation and image representation with a view to explanation.⁴

In 1984 John Tosh in *The pursuit of History* wrote that history has become a house of many mansions with numerous doors and passageways inside and that it has always been inimical to the definitions of the logician. But now more than ever it can only be adequately characterized in terms of paired opposites. It concerns both events and structures, both the individual and the mass, both mentalities and material forces. Historians themselves need to combine narrative with analytical skills, and to display empathy and detachment. Their discipline is both re-creation and explanation, both art and science; in short, history is a hybrid which defies classification.⁵ Thus the traditional approach has been supplemented, not displaced.

The broadening of the methodological approach to the past

It has also become clear from the conference that the traditional hermeneutic method of individualizing and understanding, has been supplemented by the analytical-explanatory method which generalizes and is directed at repetitive phenomena. This means that history has moved closer to the social sciences, especially sociology and political science, which rely heavily on quantification. This is apparent from the statistical data given in various papers. Certain phenomena can no longer be studied by the Rankean method alone. They can best be studied by methods borrowed from the social sciences. Here we think of urbanization, pop-

4. J.H. Huizinga, *Over vormverandering der Geschiedenis* (Amsterdam, 1941).

5. John Tosh, *The pursuit of History* (London 1987), p. 194.

ulation and demographic history and class structures. The same applies to theories and models borrowed from the social sciences which can be tested against historical reality. One thinks of "class" as a category, borrowed from Marxist sociology and much used at this conference.

In the last 30 years aspects of Marx's thought have been widely applied to historical research in the West, for example the historical significance of the means of production and the relation between classes. Marxism's strong appeal to historians is that it meets so well the need for theory, but of course they need always to be on the alert against a deterministic approach, especially in regard to the base-superstructure metaphor. Marxist historiography has contributed fresh and stimulating insights, which makes me think of the West German historian, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, who shocked his fellow historians by declaring that he had learned more from Marx than from Ranke.

The enrichment of traditional historical methods by techniques derived from the social sciences represents the most significant methodological advance since Ranke.⁶ The interdisciplinary approach made historical pronouncements more precise and comprehensive. This does not mean that the integrity of history as a separate discipline has been undermined. Robert Fogel's differentiation between "traditional history" and "scientific history", refuted by G.R. Elton in *Which road to the past?*⁷ is surely not valid. We may today speak of a kind of synthesis between the historicist's hermeneutic method of "understanding" and the Positivist's analytical-explanatory method, which complement rather than oppose one another.⁸

The conference a milestone in the relations between S.A. historians

I regard this 1989 conference as a milestone in the relations between South African historians mutually. After the controversy between radical and liberal historians since the early 1970's, this is the first time that historians from both schools of thought have come together to participate in a joint conference. This is a breakthrough in the right direction, which could contribute to the enrichment of history as a discipline. Discussion and debate is the very lifeblood of the practice of history.

One has the impression that the entry of the new thematics and methodology into history as a discipline in South Africa caused the historical pendulum to swing too far to the left, especially in the beginning. This was evident in a too rigid application of Marx's theories, which in turn elicited an intense response from more traditionally-minded historians. Experience of theory, which plays an important role in our subject, has shown that too great an abstraction leads to the disappearance of the flesh-and-blood human being behind anonymous forces.

The gradual return to greater realism has brought the conventional historian, who now concedes that the darker side of capitalism has not been sufficiently recognized and evaluated, closer to the innovators who were first to bring the "new" history⁹ to South Africa. This does not mean, however, that complete agreement has been reached on the fundamentals of history.

What the conference has clearly illustrated is that history has been diversified, showing a plural nature on a multi-faceted basis. We must accept that more than one approach to the past is possible. South African historians have benefited from the renewal in the traditional

6. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

7. R.W. Fogel & G.R. Elton, *Which road to the past? Two views of History* (Yale, 1963), p. 40.

8. F.A. van Jaarsveld, *Moderne Geskiedskrywing* (Durban, 1982), pp. 40-41.

9. Cf. T.K. Rabb & R.I. Rotbreg, *The New History. The 1980's and beyond* (Princeton, 1982).

approach to the past. This has gained the upperhand in Europe, Britain and the United States during the 1960's. At that time the prospects for history appeared bleak and uncertain. Historians were faced with declining interest in their work from both students and the public; it was as if they had landed up in an ivory tower.

Because history in the eyes of students appeared incapable of meeting the challenges of change in the new industrialized society they turned to sociology and political science instead.¹⁰ The new orientation of history toward the social sciences has, however, turned the tide. In 1988 Prof R.E. van der Ross wrote: "About twenty years ago there was a decline in history and teaching history in this country ... Today there seems to be a renaissance in regard to the subject".¹¹ The problem of stagnation has been overcome by a flood of innovations originating in Europe which brought new life into the study of history.

Some gaps that remained to be filled

It is self-evident that the scope of the conference theme is so wide that there remained some gaps to be filled. I am thinking of themes like population history (not historical demography), immigration history, women's history, family history and the history of families, the history of society at large, the history of everyday-life, protest history as a sub-discipline in its own right, the history of science and technological changes in agriculture, mining and industry, the origin of large-scale land ownership and company-agriculture, the history of commerce, transport, services and state enterprises such as Iscor, Foscor, Sasol, and also business history.

Furthermore I have noticed gaps like institutional and administrative history in regard to industrialization and urbanization and the effects of industrialization on religious ideas and cultural movements. There are also themes such as the relationship between entrepreneur, director and politician, and the role of economic pressure-groups behind the scenes that influenced politics. We know little about the effect of industrialization and state bureaucracy on both black and white, and the influence of industrialization on our system of education and training. We are also in need of institutional and educational studies to provide understanding of the qualitative and quantitative meaning of educational policy. This is essential before school training as a factor in economic growth can be researched from an educational-economic or socio-psychological perspective.

In the themes dealt with at the conference there was little mention of the attitudes of peoples and groups toward the city and one another, of their cultural activities or measures aimed at self-preservation and organization. I would have liked to have heard about the growth of cities and the influence of urban life on literature, either black or white. What was also lacking was cultural and social anthropology, i.e. historical anthropology in an urban milieu.

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10. Cf. Jörn Rüsen, *Für eine erneuerte Historik, Studien zur Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Stuttgart-Bad, 1976); Georg Iggers, *Neue Geschichtswissenschaft, vom Historismus zur Historischen Sozialwissenschaft* (München, 1978); D. Groh, *Kritische Geschichtswissenschaft in emanzipatorischer Absicht, Überlegungen zur Geschichtswissenschaft als Sozialwissenschaft* (Köln, 1973); I. Geisse & R. Tamchina, *Ansichten einer künftigen Geschichtswissenschaft* (München, 1974); H.C. Boekrad, *Ter Elfdere 34-27/2*, Sept. 1983; J. Le Goff, *La nouvelle Histoire* (Paris, 1978).
 11. R.E. van der Ross, The pen and the sword: Seeking a new focus on History and the changing of History in South Africa, *Gister en Vandag* 15, April 1988, pp. 1-5.

The road ahead: some pitfalls and dangers of history

We have in this conference listened to papers about “popular” or “people’s history”, and strategies for teaching the history of industrialization in South African schools, and rightly so, because school history as a subject for academic discussion is a grossly neglected field of study. Few academic historians have turned their attention to the importance of historical consciousness at school level. About 30 years ago in Europe the history of Africa was still treated as an aspect of the expansion of the West, in which the indigenous peoples scarcely featured except as the object of white politics and attitudes, which is still true of our South African situation. Today the perspective is very different. African history exists in its own right, embracing both the pre-colonial past and the Afrikan experience of - and response to - colonial and subsequent Apartheid rule.

But, in regard to the new “popular” history, there lurks a danger of a very strong present-mindedness against which Louis Gottschalk in his *Understanding History*¹², Herbert Butterfield in his *History and human relations*¹³, and Pieter Geyl in his *Gebruik en misbruik der Geschiedenis*¹⁴ warned. Gottschalk wrote that the present inevitably colours our understanding of the past, and for this reason the historian must be constantly on his guard against identifying movements and institutions of the past with contemporary ones; Butterfield warned that to study the past with one eye upon the present is the source of all sins and sophistries in history. He believes present-minded history exhibits a tendency to underestimate the difference between past and present - to project modern ways of thought backwards in time and to discount those aspects of past experience which are alien to modern ideas. In this way it reduces history’s social value.

We nowadays experience the phenomenon of oppositional history. Although it is to be welcomed - the Afrikaners also had their “volksgeschiedenis” - historians should always be cautious of distortions in interpretation and one-sidedness in regard to the relevant evidence. The charge associated with “peoples” or “popular” history is closely intertwined with current liberation ideologies. It is clear that its purpose is not just to “uncover” what was previously “hidden” from history, but to demonstrate historical experience of a predetermined kind - in this case oppression and resistance - to the exclusion of material which fits less neatly into the preferences of the author. Obviously, wrote John Tosh in his *Pursuit of History*, political commitment may lead to bad history¹⁵ as was the case with the Afrikaner’s pre-scientific “volksgeskiedenis”.

In a multicultural society like South Africa we must accept a plurality of interpretations of a common past. The past also attracts those who are impatient with the slow progress in the direction of social and political change, who in their “popular” or “peoples” history are not only concerned with explaining the historical evolution of African societies, but also with creating a new black nationalist or “class“-based mythology. When an interest group in society expects an interpretation of the past which is relevant to the present, it is really seeking an arsenal for formulating decisions about the future.

I have pointed out that the history which was taught in schools during the colonial period and even at present in our industrialized South African society, was and is essentially a white man’s history in which black achievements have been disparaged or ignored. Conversely, since independence in Africa history has been an important instrument for undermining the colonial psychology of dependence and inferiority¹⁶ and has thus taken to a historical philoso-

12. New York, 1950.

13. London, 1951.

Groningen, 1956.

Tosh, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8, 123.

Tosh, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

phy of resistance and liberation. We are aware of the subversive possibilities of the new "peoples" or "popular" history, strongly concerned as it is with the present, with a view to creating a better future. Reason for scepticism about received ideas, and for studying the past in order to criticize the present is understandable. Tosh wrote that if history has ministered to authority, it has also been many times enlisted in the cause of dissent and rebellion. The reason is that oppressed groups also need the sanction of the past. Politically committed historians can sharpen the social awareness of students and workers and confirm their commitment to political action and assure them that history is on their side.¹⁷ Effective political mobilization depends on a consciousness of common experience. Thus oppositional history has the immediate effect of raising the consciousness of the group in question to revolutionary politics, popular resistance and a struggle vis-a-vis authority.¹⁸ Because the sanction of the past is sought by those committed to upholding authority, and by those intent on subverting it, history could tend to become a political battleground.¹⁹ This we experienced for many years in the Boer-Brit antithesis.

I do not have to elaborate on the problem of the present-day one-sided school history syllabi mentioned at this conference. It is a bone of contention, but it should be remembered that the present position is nothing new in South African society. In the 1870's the Afrikaners protested against a one-sided history syllabus based on "Cape" and "British" history²⁰ and again protested after 1902 against Milner's "imperial" history syllabi for South African schools.²¹ After 1948 English-speaking historians and educationists protested against a one-sided Afrikaner-centered vision of the past²² and since 1974 black educationists have condemned the one-sided white syllabi for history teaching.²³ Thus we have had a debate that has continued up to the very present and ended up in today's "alternative" education and the "people's history" movement.²⁴ As regards the "popular" or "people's" history which originated in Oxford, the question is whether it will prove to be a fashionable passing phenomenon or a new door to the past. Without a purified and rational basis it is fated to end up in a cul-de-sac, supported only by what Hans-Ulrich Wehler termed "barefoot" historians.

Surely each cultural group in South African society has the right to legitimize its own existence, orientate itself and establish its identity in the present uncertain world. Our main objective should be the cultivation of historical consciousness. Perhaps a multi-perspectivistic approach to history teaching could meet the needs of a multi-cultural society in which a common history syllabus ought never to be prescriptive, but rather rest on the consensus of all interest and participating groups. I believe an alternative history syllabus for use in our schools should either be stretched leaving a very wide choice to the teacher or be regionalized or decentralized as is the case in Europe. In West Germany we find 11 syllabi, one for each federal state or in the case of Switzerland, one for each canton.

In conclusion I again refer to John Tosh who reminds us that historians are the only people qualified to equip society with a truly historical perspective thereby saving it from the detrimental effects of exposure to historical myth.

17. Tosh, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

18. Tosh, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

19. Tosh, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

20. F.A. van Jaarsveld, *Theory and method of teaching History* (Johannesburg, 1964), pp. 68-73.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-80.

22. A.C. Martin, *History in our schools* (Durban, 1953) and F.A. van Jaarsveld, *The Afrikaner's interpretation of South African History* (Cape Town, 1964), pp. 47-54.

23. F.A. van Jaarsveld, *Omstrede Suid-Afrikaanse verlede* (Johannesburg, 1984), p. 164.

24. Tosh, *op. cit.*, p. 21.