

History writing and history education in post-apartheid South Africa

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Potentials and realities in the use of history in nation building

Historical research gives current events and situations perspective. Revealing the theories and interpretations of earlier periods not only gives insight into the society of that time. History writing is an important part of a nation-state's collective memory and the nature of historiography is essentially selective and ideological. History is not necessarily a product of the past, but often a product of the needs or requests of the present.

The history of the liberation struggle, which brought about the democratic change of 1994, unfortunately is still a closed book to most South Africans. Like someone who has long been struck with collective amnesia due to decades of falsification of history and begins to recover, a nation that does not know its past, nor cares to understand the past history of the men and women who sacrificed their personal security in the struggle for freedom cannot understand the significance of 1994.¹

South Africa is a country that is currently creating for itself a new set of symbols while at the same time re-evaluating the old ones.

A possible development in the new South Africa that was predicted by some, but has not yet been realised, was the elevation of the freedom movements' historiography, first and foremost the ANC's, to honour and dignity, which could have materialised partially through a professionalisation of the organisations' own authors, or partially as inspiration and study area at the universities.

Many expected, with the transfer of power to a majority government in 1994 that a new nationalist history writing would emerge, as had happened in other parts of Africa with the decolonisation in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One predicted new direction was a black African nationalist one that would stress the African contribution to the exclusion of others, and see whites mainly as intruders into an essentially African country.

However, at the beginning of the new millennium, little is being written on the development of South African historical writing, despite post-modernist concerns with how historical knowledge is produced, and with self-reflection. The transfer of power that took place in 1994 has not yet been matched by any significant new historiographical development.

There could be several reasons for this. To explain the absence of a new direction in South African historiography in the 1990s, Martin Legassick and Gary Minkley point to the nature of the negotiated revolution.² The transfer of power in South Africa was different from the decolonisations of tropical Africa thirty years previously, in the way that it was the result of a set of negotiations within the country between the ruling white minority, which was forced to give up political power, and the party, representing the majority, which accepted a liberal democratic constitution and at least in middle-long term agreed to work within a capitalist framework. Radical liberatory history for example became less relevant due to the actual demobilisation of social struggle.

¹ Magubane, Bernhard: "Whose Memory - Whose History? The Illusion of Liberal and Radical Historical Debates", In Conference Book Publication: Hans Erik Stolten (ed.): *History-Making and Present Day Politics. The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*, NAI, Forthcoming.

² M. Legassick and G. Minkley, "Current Trends in the Production of South African History", *Alternation*, 5/1, 1998.

Saunders adds another possible and partly conflicting explanation: that the historiographical equivalent to the dramatic political change of 1994 already had taken place decades earlier. He suggests that South African history was decolonised long before the political decolonisation of 1994.³ He refers, I think, to the wave of liberal Africanism spearheaded by *Oxford History* around 1970.⁴

The absence of a completely new historiographical approach, however, does not mean that there has been stagnation in the practical use of history.

Just ten years ago Neville Alexander, a well known South African intellectual, said, “*We are not in the period of transition as passive spectators*”⁵ and he went further:

“*We are part of this transition - we can shape it. In shaping and fashioning the history curriculum we are ourselves making history. We are giving shape both to the history of the present and the future.*”⁶

His confidence was understandable. The writing of South African history writing and teaching, when he spoke, had been blooming for twenty years as a fertile field. The various streams of what was then known as “radical” or “revisionist” historical scholarship had become the most influential body of work direction in shaping the understanding of the South African past. Their influence was not restricted to the academic world. In South Africa, remarked a leading imperial English historian, “*History in the 1970s and 1980s became the master tool of intellectual resistance*” to apartheid.⁷ Many South African historians had sought a praxis reaching beyond the university world, translating historical knowledge into broader popular contributions; working together with trade unions, civics, political organisations and other agents of democracy; improving school teaching texts, progressive pedagogy and classroom practice.

Writing in 1996 Norman Etherington predicted that future South Africans might look back to the period between 1960 and 1990 as “a golden age of historical writing”. The main reasons for the tremendous outbreak of history writing during this era he observed, was that,

“*In the years between the tragedy of Sharpeville and Mandela’s triumphant emergence from prison, historians of many different tendencies saw their research as a useful political tool in the fight against injustice*”.⁸

That the study of history has lost much of its excitement and appeal in South Africa in the years since 1996 cannot be seriously in doubt.⁹ Early warnings of disciplinary anxiety were voiced by several scholars in 1994 - the very year of the first democratic election.¹⁰

³ C. Saunders, “The Transitions from Apartheid to Democracy in Namibia and South Africa in the Context of Decolonization”, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, Vol. 1/1, 2000.

⁴ Wilson, Monica / Thompson, Leonard M. (eds.): *The Oxford History of South Africa*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969-71.

⁵ In 1992, three history curriculum conferences were held in Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town. Alexander addressed an audience of some 150 history teachers and academics.

⁶ History Education Group, *History Matters: Debates about a new history curriculum for South Africa*, Heinemann-Centaur, Johannesburg, 1993, p. 13.

⁷ Etherington, Norman, “Edward Palmer Thompson”, *Southern African Review of Books*, 5/6, Nov/Dec 1993, p. 5.

⁸ N. Etherington, “Post-Modernism and South African History”, *Southern African Review of Books*, 44, 1996.

⁹ It is not quite clear to which extent South Africa is following world trends in this respect. In Britain, for example, history has recently become a fashion subject in television.

¹⁰ Rich, Paul, “Is South African Radical Social History Becoming Irrelevant?”, *South African Historical Journal*, 31, 1994, p. 191; Etherington, Norman, “Fissures in the Post-apartheid Academy”, *South African Historical Journal*, 31, Nov. 1994, pp. 206-7; Freund, Bill, “The Art of Writing History”, *Southern African Review of Books*, Sep/Oct 1994, p. 24; Maylam, Paul “Tensions Within the Practice of History”, *South African Historical Journal*, 33, Nov. 1995, pp. 3-12; Paul Maylam’s Presidential address to the South African Historical Society *Tensions within the Practice of History* in Nuttall, Tim and Wright, John, “Exploring History with a Capital ‘H’”, *Current Writing*, 10, 2, 1998, p. 38.

The present problems for history could partly be caused by the possibility that the concept of “shared past reconciliation history” might have been more useful for the original rainbowism of 1994 than it is for the freshly invented official concept of New Patriotism, and by the fact that the profession has failed to lead to obvious employment, and for that matter by white male historians’ scepticism. However, history is also simply experienced by many students as a “source of discomfort and embarrassment”.¹¹

Whiteness and lack of interest

The black South Africans have been denied access to their own history. The history they learned in school gave them no sense of a past they could identify with, as the whites had colonised the history as well. Majeke was aware of this in her work from 1952:

‘If the rulers can make the people believe that they are inferior, wipe out their past history or present it in such a way that they feel, not pride but shame, then they create the conditions that make it easy to dominate the people.’¹²

It has not been easy for blacks to rediscover oral African tradition in history instruction. Early in the 1950s, Z. K. Matthews expressed concern for black history administration on the basis of his own experiences at the black university in Fort Hare:

‘Our history as we had absorbed it from the tales and talk of our elders, bore no resemblance to South African history as it has been written by European scholars, or as it is taught in South African schools, and as it was taught to us at Fort Hare. The European insisted that we accept his version of the past..we struggled through the white man’s version of the so-called Kaffir Wars...we studied this history not merely in the white man’s version...but in a distinctly pro-Boer version.’¹³

It will be a problematic task for the historiographers to outline in what way white history has been forced on black academics and students, and the effects of this, but it goes without saying that the devaluated picture of history was a contributing factor to so few blacks being attracted to the official history studies, of which Matthews was already aware:

‘It is hardly surprising, therefore, that western-educated Africans have up until now largely skirted history as a field of work...it is high time that African history, written from the African point of view, takes its place on library shelves.’¹⁴

More than 40 years later, the situation in this area is largely unchanged. Specialist literature written by black historians does not take up much space on the shelves of the university libraries. This is the most serious weakness in South African historiography of all, and in this regards a great responsibility rests on the institutionalised historical science as well as the popular movements. Contributions to the history written by blacks at a scientific level are absolutely necessary if the research community under democratic black majority rule is not to appear to be an exclusive white island, a colonial remnant from the apartheid period. Such a thing would be the irony of fate after the liberal English-speaking university community for many years has touted racial integration.

An important reason for the unfortunate present situation for history is that few black historians have been able to obtain, and retain, academic jobs. Some of the best black historians are lost to government and the private sector.

¹¹ Nuttall, Tim and Wright, John, “Probing the Predicaments of Academic History in Contemporary South Africa”, *South African Historical Journal*, 42, May 2000, p. 28.

¹² Majeke, Nosipho, *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest*, Cape Town: Johannesburg, Society of Young Africa, 1952, Introduction.

¹³ Matthews, Z.K.: / Wilson, Monica (eds.), *Freedom for My People. The Autobiography of Z.K. Matthews: Southern Africa 1901-1968*, Cape Town, 1981, p. 58.

¹⁴ Matthews, Z.K.: / Wilson, Monica (eds.): Op.cit. p. 59.

Students seek subjects that seem more in tune with the future world they are about to enter and are directly relevant for jobs, at a time when history teaching in schools has been more or less phased out.

The Financial Mail some time ago published a typical little piece saying that history is all washed up, history is insignificant, the universities and the schools aren't really teaching it any more and students don't take it seriously.

Women and black historians remain in the minority. History writing in South Africa is still a white male dominated field, although there are very encouraging developments in the numbers of black and women students taking Ph.D.s in history.

Knowledge on African history as beyond the borders of South Africa remains wanting. Only a little more than 10% of the some 500 historians that registered with the South African History Project specialise in African history, as other than South African history.

In my opinion, all good history writing is the history of how present conflicts are rooted in the past. Which can not be equally comforting for all of course and many would like to be allowed the luxury of forgetting. Pupils in Cape Town schools believed that *"history is a wrong subject ... because ... we must make peace in our land"* that *"it makes pain for other people and their families"*.¹⁵ This complex of problems rapidly translated into falling enrolments for history at high schools and universities. Traditionally a core undergraduate subject, history *"is now being pushed to the margins of student preference"* yielding *"a smaller pool of potential postgraduate students"*.¹⁶

Tellingly, some teachers give testimony that South African youth seems to care less and less about the past. Even though present-day youth are given a *"more or less relevant history"*, they do not seem particularly *interested* and they know fairly little about what happened in the past. This can be rather discouraging. A teacher in a town-ship school states:

*"They don't appreciate, for instance, where we come from and they can't relate to what is happening now. There is a sense of apathy and that will prove very difficult in terms of this nation building exercise, because you cannot build on a foundation that you know very little of. There has got to be that foundation – history is that foundation."*¹⁷

For this reason among others South African universities at the end of the 1990s became late but keen converts to the doctrine of affordability, efficiency, and rational resource allocation. History departments were among the first to be renamed, restructured and downsized.

The problems of higher education in general

The policy ambitions of the South African government for higher education since 1994 can be distinguished by two landmarks: the optimism of massification in the mid-1990s, and the reality of mergers ten years later.¹⁸ Whereas massification signalled a possible expansion of higher education opportunities, mergers mean a contraction of higher education institutions. While massification assumed greater student demand on the 36 public institutions of higher education, mergers represent (in part) a response to the unexpected and rapid decline in qualifying students from the school sector. And while massification left institutional identities relatively unscathed, mergers were deployed as a direct intervention to recast institutional landscapes.

¹⁵ Sieborger, Rob, "History and the Emerging Nation: The South African Experience", *International Journal of Historical Learning Teaching and Research*, 1, 1, December 2000, p. 5.

¹⁶ Nuttall, Tim and Wright, John, "Probing the Predicaments of Academic History in Contemporary South Africa", *South African Historical Journal*, 42, May 2000, p. 27.

¹⁷ Teacher, grade eight quoted from Ray, Giulia, "Creating the Future - Post-Apartheid Use of History Education for Nation Building Purposes", In Conference Book Publication: Hans Erik Stolten (ed.): *History-Making and Present Day Politics. The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*, Forthcoming, NAI.

¹⁸ Jonathan Jansen, "The state of higher education in South Africa: From massification to mergers", In Adam Habib, John Daniel and Roger Southall, *State of the Nation. South Africa 2003-2004*, HSRC Press, 2003.

After the change of power in 1994, a “programme of transformation” was announced through Education White Paper 3.¹⁹ The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), in a remarkably short period of operation (1995-96), produced a report that laid the groundwork for higher education policy in South Africa. According to one of its key authors:

*“The central proposal of the NCHE was that South African higher education should be massified.”*²⁰

Massification assumed an absolute growth in student enrolments as well as a more egalitarian distribution of students in higher education - one that reflected the race and gender profile of the nation. This would mean, in essence, a shift from higher education as an elite system to higher education as a mass-based system.

However, very little changed in terms of indicators of higher education transformation in South Africa, despite the heady optimism of the White Paper on Higher Education and its institutional interpreters. No large-scale bail-out funding for historically disadvantaged institutions emerged. Massification did not really happen. Where it did, it was restricted to a small number of historically white institutions capable of expanding their market share in the mid-1990s at the same time as overall higher education enrolments spiralled downwards.²¹ The decline in high-school graduates was a disaster for black universities in that, increasingly, middle-class and above-average black students were drawn to the former white institutions. This decline impacted directly on the already vulnerable historically black institutions, struggling with financial deficits, high failure rates, managerial ineffectiveness and poor students unable to pay for higher education. At the same time they experienced a dramatic incline in institutional instability during the mid- to late-1990s. Black institutions were embroiled in a vortex of student revolt, staffing conflicts, managerial ineptitude, unstable councils and senates, and a general failure of the leadership of universities and technikons. The net effect of this shift was to place already weak and fragile black universities in a precarious position in terms of funding and future survival.²²

The first substantial reference to an imminent institutional restructuring process emerged in July 1999, following the appointment of Prof. Kader Asmal as the second post-apartheid Minister of Education.²³

The Council on Higher Education (CHE), a statutory body that advises the Minister, was approached to provide advice on the reconfiguration of the higher education system. In July 2000 the CHE task team presented its report and here, for the first time, the spectre of “combinations” of institutions is explicitly discussed and elaborated beyond the hitherto more vague terms such as “restructuring” or “reconfiguration”.

*“...the combination of institutions - whether through mergers or other mechanisms - will be demanding processes.”*²⁴

In response to the CHE report, the Minister released in March 2001 a National Plan for Higher Education that essentially agreed with their recommendations and he appointed a

¹⁹ Education White Paper 3: *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*, Pretoria: Department of Education, 1997; Koen, C., “Challenges and pressures facing the academic profession in South Africa”, in P. Altbach (ed.) *The decline of the guru: The academic profession in developing and middle-income countries*, 2002.

²⁰ Cloete, N., Maasen, P., Moja, T., Perold, H., Gibbon, T. & Fehnel, R. (eds.), *Transformation in higher education: Global pressures and local realities in South Africa*, Cape Town, Jura, 2002.

²¹ Cloete, N. and Bunting, *Higher education transformation: Assessing performance in South Africa*, Pretoria: Centre for Higher Education Transformation, 1999.

²² Habib, A., “The institutional crisis of the University of the Transkei”, *Politikon*, 28, 2, 2001; Jansen, JD (ed.), *Mergers in higher education: Lessons learned in transitional contexts*, Pretoria, UNISA Press, 2002.

²³ *Call to Action: Mobilising Citizens to Build a South African Education and Training System for the 21st Century*, Pretoria, Department of Education, 1999.

²⁴ *Towards a New Higher Education Landscape: Meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Development Imperatives of South Africa in the 21st Century*, Pretoria, CHE, 2000.

National Working Group (NWG) to advise on “*arrangements for restructuring the provision of higher education...including institutional mergers*”.²⁵ In December 2001 the NWG released its report and recommended the reduction of higher education institutions from 36 to 21 through the specific mechanism of mergers, listing the specific institutions. With few modifications the Cabinet approved the following mergers and incorporations among others:

- The University of Natal and the University of Durban-Westville.
- The University of the North-West and Potchefstroom University.
- The University of Fort Hare and the East London campus of Rhodes University.
- The incorporation of Vista University campuses into specified universities.
- The University of Port Elizabeth and the Port Elizabeth Technikon.
- The University of the North and the Medical University of South Africa.

The focus of this governmental strategy, from an institutional point of view, was race-blind, in that the aim was to deracialise all institutions and to create a smaller number of high-quality, non-racial institutions.

The path chosen for higher education restructuring enables one to explain a number of recent events. For instance why recent language policy for higher education deflated expectations of designated Afrikaans-exclusive institutions. The Cabinet decided that no university would be able to offer instruction in the exclusive medium of Afrikaans, given the negative implications for access of black students and staff. Also, why none of the inefficient rural institutions (mainly black universities) were earmarked for merger with highly efficient urban institutions (mainly the former white universities). The reasoning of government and its advisory body, the CHE, was not to destabilise already efficient institutions, except to require some minimal adjustments. Inefficient colleges of education were closed (and the few effective ones incorporated into universities), effectively removing 80.000 student teachers from the system. In sum, the idea was to strengthen the competitive position of the urban and former white institutions while at the same time dealing with the inefficiencies of rural and black institutions through closure, merger or incorporation. This means that there will be fewer access routes open to rural students wishing to pursue university education unless meaningful alternatives are instituted, nurtured and sustained.

History in the schools

The great expectations for the role of history in nation building and identity creation also involved basic education. Especially between 1992 and 1994, there were lots of optimistic activity — involving academics, teachers, publishers and civil servants — seeking to deal with the history issue as a matter of pedagogic and political urgency. There was obviously a common point of departure: that textbooks of the kind that had served apartheid education at primary, secondary and tertiary level had to go. They would not be much lamented: the affable, unthinking racism of Boyce and Smit, the poor excuses for apartheid policies peddled by Joubert and Britz, and the self-satisfied narrowness of Muller’s *Five Hundred Years* had attracted lots of critic and had very few defenders during the final years of apartheid.²⁶ But what would replace them?

The continued use of apartheid textbooks in schools has attracted much attention in parliament debates. Several publishing houses have drawn attention to the work they have been undertaking. In one out of only very few responses from the universities Rob Sieborger pointed at a curriculum conference back in 1993 that highlighted the role of textbooks in the

²⁵ *The Restructuring of the Higher Education System in South Africa - Report of the National Working Group to the Minister of Education*, Pretoria, Department of Education, 2001.

²⁶ The references are, respectively, to a primary school text used in “white” schools, to a secondary “history” textbook used in African schools run by the Department of Education and Training, and to a widely prescribed and general text for university use.

history curriculum. Already then there were a range of new history textbooks in the making that could provide a significant alternative to apartheid textbooks but unfortunately they have not yet made much headway in the market.²⁷

The Minister of Education has aired a vision of providing for every school child in 2004 an apartheid text that will serve to educate them about the evils of apartheid. This task has not been finalised. However, work in the South African History Project has begun to draw up terms for such a text.

Different models of history book writing have been discussed over time. One approach to history text book making promoted quite persistently in the late 1980s and early 1990s might be called conservative pluralism. Floris van Jaarsveld, elder of Afrikaans-language historical scholarship, had for two decades warned his colleagues of the vulnerability of the classic Afrikaner nationalist paradigm; he called for a present-minded approach sensitive to the demands of a “new” and “modernised” South Africa. What was needed was a “general” history of South Africa which found a place for all politically legitimated “groups”.²⁸ In 1982 he wrote:

“Along with an individual historical image which can account for an own existence and the identity of a cultural or national group, we need a general South African image of the past which does justice to the totality of the people, regardless of colour or class, giving them a feeling of belonging to one South African nation and one fatherland — the RSA.”

In 1990 van Jaarsveld went further:

“In revised curricula more room will have to be made for Black history in its own right, and a balance must be struck between Black and White history ... There must be an awareness ... that in the historical unity of South African society there is a spectrum of diverse and contra-distinctive groups, each with its own historical origin ... the syllabus content must be presented with emphasis on the diversity ... [syllabi] will have to be based on consensus among the groups involved, Black, Brown and White.”²⁹

An attempt designed to produce such a syllabus was the (at that point in time still rather conservative) Human Sciences Research Council report on *The Teaching of History in Secondary Schools in the RSA* produced in 1991.³⁰ Like van Jaarsveld, its authors’ point of departure was still the existence of ethnically defined groups or communities. It held out some hope for a more inclusive history: “the core themes presented in the syllabus should be themes involving all South Africans” and envisaged syllabi that should “therefore be neither eurocentric nor afrocentric, but historically balanced”.³¹

A textbook designed on this conservative pluralist/multi-cultural model might have produced an insipid, sanitised negotiated history based on consensus. “Content may be reached by means of intergroup conferences”, as van Jaarsveld proposed in his attempted rapprochement.³² Or it might have pursued the logic of one-community-one-chapter and provided an “own affairs” (eie sake) segregated history, regionalised or compartmentalised,

²⁷Cynthia Kros, Textbook Research Project: An Initial Audit, SAHP July 2002.

²⁸ Quoted in Van Jaarsveld, Floris, “Controversial South African History”, *Internationale Schulbuchforschung*, 12, 117-38., 1990, p. 137.

²⁹ Op. cit., p. 136.

³⁰ Bundy, Colin: “New Nation, New History? Constructing the past in post-apartheid South Africa”, In Conference Book Publication: Hans Erik Stolten (ed.): *History-Making and Present Day Politics. The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*, Forthcoming, NAI.

³¹ Quoted in Bundy, Colin (1993) “What makes a nation happy? Historiographical changes and the implications for text-books”, unpublished paper, delivered at Sparkling Waters Colloquium on History Textbooks, 1993, p. 5.

³² Jaarsveld, Op. cit., p. 136.

reinforcing ethnic identities, and surrendering in advance any possibility of an interpretative overview.

A second model has sought a more explicitly corrective version of the past, and was unapologetic about its political project. This might be called nation-building pluralism. One of its clearest expressions is to be found in a short survey, published in 1993 by History Education Group.³³ It called for a new history syllabus based on three goals: national reconstruction, reconciliation and the recognition of cultural and geographical diversity.³⁴ The language echoed that of the Codesa talks being held at the time. Ismail Vadi made the analogy explicit:

*“The whole exercise [curriculum reconstruction] ... is fundamentally a political exercise ... Just as the political future of this country is going through a complicated route of negotiations, similarly, curriculum development must involve all the major participants ... The processes involved in curriculum development must be negotiated by both parties.”*³⁵

Vadi also called for a curriculum based on the “principle” of a national history:

*“[one] which can begin to generate a sense of a single nation ... a central mechanism which can generate a sense of national consciousness and identity.”*³⁶

John Pampallis, similarly, said that the big question was:

*“..how a history curriculum can promote national reconciliation while redressing past imbalances and without glossing over the gross injustices and struggles of our conflict-ridden past.”*³⁷

Around the time of 1994 the members of the HSRC task team and those of the History Education Group represented opposing political positions. HSRC supported de Klerk’s reformism, while HEG supported the Mass Democratic Movement/ANC. Yet in retrospect what is striking is how similar their “solutions” to the textbook question were. Although the HEG was committed to a unitary, democratic state and to a version of the past that sought to redress the “*neglect and vilification*” of the African majority, like the HSRC report they also relied on a somewhat simplistic process of making texts more inclusive — as though “*what we put in or leave out of the syllabus is seen as the vital issue*”.³⁸ Although inflected in more progressive tones, the HEG proponents also looked to a negotiated, or consensus, version of the past.

Shortly after the collective work *History Matters* was published,³⁹ two colloquia on Writing School History Textbooks were held. “*Some participants advanced nation-building as being at the core, others were less convinced.*”⁴⁰ One participant warned of a considerable tension between the political objective of nation building and the educational project of equipping young South Africans with the ability to think historically about themselves and their society. The problem of a history syllabus designed to “*generate a sense of national consciousness and identity*” is that it all too easily becomes manipulating and teleological, even if many

³³ History Education Group (HEG), *History Matters: Debates about a new history curriculum for South Africa*, 1993.

³⁴ Op. cit., p. 16.

³⁵ Op. cit., p. 26.

³⁶ Op. cit., p. 27.

³⁷ Op. cit., p. 21.

³⁸ Cuthbertson, Greg and Grundlingh, Albert, “Some Problematical Issues in the Restructuring of History Education in South African Schools”, *South African Historical Journal*, 26, p. 154-157, 1992, p. 161.

³⁹ History Education Group, *History Matters: Debates about a new history curriculum for South Africa*, Heinemann-Centaur, Johannesburg, 1993.

⁴⁰ Sieborger, Rob, “Reconceptualising South African School History Textbooks”, *South African Historical Journal*, 30, May 1994, pp. 102-103.

good intentions have been adduced.⁴¹ A statement generated by the colloquia expressly advised an approach that:

*“...seeks to reconcile national unity and cultural diversity by making it clear that nationalism, ethnicity, culture and identity have been constructed over time”*⁴²

Perhaps the most significant attempt to actually write a narrative history of South Africa in agreement with the TRC is Norman Etherington’s synthesis. He acknowledges nevertheless that the idea of a past that all South Africans can share is perhaps an unattainable goal:

*“Pursuing such a goal will not, of course, produce a single agreed version of history. There will always be many points of view, many stories to be told. What I am arguing here is that historians will tell their stories better if they hold the ideal of a shared history constantly in mind.”*⁴³

Etherington’s strategy links with a third version of post-apartheid history.⁴⁴ Bundy has called this later and probably prevailing model: *“The New Model Textbook Approach”*. In essence, while it remains concerned with the content and interpretation of South African history, its main emphasis is that the curriculum should *“reflect advances in the discipline of history”*. That is: school texts should reflect recent and current debates about the past; the approach to the past should be inclusive and democratic; the approach to historical knowledge should be analytical and explanatory; skills and content should be inseparable so that the curriculum conveys a sense of how knowledge is produced and history not presented as a set of given facts. Historical education should develop: *“..empathetic understanding, emotional and moral commitment with the past”* and an awareness of the constant interrelationship of the past and the present. South African history should reflect the diversity of its population, while also accounting for processes that have created a single society; and should locate the country’s history within regional, continental and global events and processes.⁴⁵

The “new model textbook approach” seems very attractive and has been consciously pursued in the production of “progressive” textbooks by several publishers. Reflecting the epistemological debates of the 1990s, the new model textbook has in some cases incorporated “postmodern” emphases. A 1998 new school and college text covering the apartheid years emphasises that it offers but one of many other kinds of possible accounts of apartheid; reflects on the particular interests and background of its authors; points to the existence of alternative approaches and stresses the importance of debate and independent enquiry.⁴⁶ Later critiques of Curriculum 2005 have advocated an approach to school history that questions established categories, argue for multiple identities, calls for the disruption of boundaries and celebrates *“the loss of certainty”*.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Bundy, Colin, “What makes a nation happy? Historiographical changes and the implications for text-books”, unpublished paper, delivered at Sparkling Waters Colloquium on History Textbooks, 1993, p. 7.

⁴² Sieborger, Rob, “Reconceptualising South African School History Textbooks”, *South African Historical Journal* 30, 1994, pp. 100, 101.

⁴³ Norman Etherington, *The Great Treks: The Transformation of Southern Africa, 1815-1854*, London and New York: Pearson Longman, 2001, p. xi, xii, xviii.

⁴⁴ Op. cit., p. 4.

⁴⁵ Sieborger, Op. cit., pp. 100-101.

⁴⁶ Nuttall, Tim and Wright, John, “Exploring History with a Capital ‘H’”, *Current Writing*, 10, 2, 38-61, 1998, pp. 53-54.

⁴⁷ Kros, Cynthia, *Curriculum 2005 and the end of History*, History Curriculum Research Project, Report No. 3, Cambridge University Press and History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg,, 1998, pp. 8-16.

As things developed in the area of history education, the danger for rigid government policies expressed by some did not manifest to any great extent. Actually, the GNU-government did not feel much need for the use of history.

Nevertheless, many historians were unhappy with the way that first versions of the new curriculum 2005 proposals, introduced under Bengu's tenure as Minister of Education, affected the teaching of history. In particular, many were concerned that history was collapsed together with geography and civics up to Grade 10 (the previous standard 8). In addition, no real attention was being paid to the revision of its content, since the new idea of outcomes based education was concerned much more with method than with content. The first versions of the curriculum, promulgated in 1996, defining the compulsory school syllabus for the next decade, removed all reference to history.

The low ranking of history had a multiplier effect that created the perception that history was redundant. The consequences have been drastic, leading to history teachers becoming outmoded, decline in university enrolment for the study of history and history teacher training. The full scale is only realised with reports confirming that in 2002 at the Potchefstroom College of Education, for the first time in the history of the college, there are no first year students registered for History.⁴⁸ Reports from eight provincial workshops run by the South Africa History Project confirmed the declining numbers in history classes.

The overall problems of Curriculum 2005

One of the most contentious areas of concern in education during recent years has been the development and implementation of Curriculum 2005 (C2005). Not only is it expected to overcome old educational practices, social inequalities linked to educational difference, and apartheid-based social values, it is also expected to position South Africa in the competitive participation of a global economy.⁴⁹

In 1994, the new government inherited a complex and collapsed system of education. High levels of illiteracy, dysfunctional schools and universities. The school curriculum was seen as reinforcing racial injustice and inequality; its transformation a necessity for the promotion of:

*“..unity and the common citizenship and destiny of all South Africans irrespective of race, class, gender or ethnic background”.*⁵⁰

This philosophy was found also in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). It provided an early vision of a core national curriculum which would integrate academic and vocational skills. Drawn up in the 1990-1994 period by business and Cosatu, and taken up by the ANC, it was given legislative form through the National Education Policy Act of 1996.

The curriculum process represented a historic compromise achieved between old and new ruling elites. New values to which most could now subscribe were articulated, but there were also continuities made by the national Department of Education in its 1992 Curriculum Model for a New South Africa.⁵¹

Even if social expectations were high for fundamental change in a number of areas, there were early signs that South Africa was embarking on a form of self-imposed structural adjustment. Fiscal discipline became the agenda as the new government adopted Gear.⁵² Strict monetarist policies took precedence over more expansionist and welfarist visions.⁵³

⁴⁸ S. Bester, “History – a cry for help”, South Africa History Project Workshop, North West Province, Rustenburg, 6 May 2002.

⁴⁹ Linda Chisholm, “The state of curriculum reform in South Africa: The issue of Curriculum 2005”. In Adam Habib, John Daniel and Roger Southall, *State of the Nation. South Africa 2003-2004*, HSRC Press, 2003.

⁵⁰ ANC Education Department, *A Policy Framework for Education and Training, Braamfontein*, ANC, 1994, p. 68.

⁵¹ Kraak, A., “Discursive shifts and structural continuities in South African vocational education and training: 1981-1999”, in P Kallaway (ed.), *The history of education under apartheid, 1948-1994: The doors of learning and culture shall be opened*, Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 2002.

⁵² *Understanding GEAR. Growth, Employment and Redistribution, The Government's new economic strategy*,

The purposes of schooling at this time were framed in terms primarily of its economic functions and ability to meet larger economic needs. Effective schools were those which could balance their budgets and produce sound learning outcomes. While the education budget was restructured to achieve greater racial equity, it was not expanded. The South African Schools Act (1996) effectively decentralised authority to struggling provincial administrations and highly unequally-endowed school governing bodies.

When launched in 1997, C2005 gave hope once more, but problems quickly occurred. Three different developments happened in 1999 which had a decisive effect on the curriculum: the first was the accession of Professor Kader Asmal as Minister of Education, the second was the connection made between South Africa's poor learner achievements and school curricula and the third was increasing departmentally-based evidence that implementation was not going as planned. Some linked poor educational results to approaches advocated through C2005, which emphasise process and everyday knowledge at the expense of conceptual and content knowledge.⁵⁴

After considerable deliberation with the Department of Education (DoE), the Minister appointed a committee to review C2005 in February 2000. Instead of reasserting the dominant human capital theory and school effectiveness approaches within which education was being cast, the report from the Review Committee consciously promoted and reaffirmed the less dominant goals of social justice, equity and development. It stressed the anti-discriminatory and human rights-based orientation of the curriculum.⁵⁵ The report showed that while there was overwhelming support for the principles of outcomes-based education (OBE), implementation had been confounded by a number of issues. The Review Committee therefore proposed the introduction of a revised curriculum structure supported by changes in teacher orientation and training, learning-support materials and the organisation, resourcing and staffing of curriculum structures and functions in national and provincial education departments. The critique of the Review Committee was necessary and constructive, but perhaps it overestimated departmental capacity to address each and every one of the many problems identified.

A simplified C2005, the Draft Revised National Curriculum Statement, was developed by a combination of departmental officials and non-departmental participants hereunder teacher educators, NGOs, representatives of teacher unions. Special attention was paid to implementation and inclusivity in the curriculum and it stressed a rights-based approach to citizenship alongside clarity and accessibility.⁵⁶ The Revised National Curriculum Statement was ultimately made available in all 11 official languages.

The debate about content cut across all learning areas but emerged most strongly around history. Those voices opposed to history in primary school became less vociferous. This was partly due to the Minister's determination to see history in the curriculum, partly due to the emerging actual content of the new history curriculum, and partly to the weight given to the issue by the mobilised history community through the publication of the History and Archaeology Report and the subsequent establishment of the South African History Project.

ANC, 2nd Quarter 1997.

⁵³ Chisholm, L., Soudien, C., Vally, S. & Gilmour D., "Teachers and structural adjustment in South Africa", *Educational Policy*, 13,4, 1999.

⁵⁴ Muller, J., "Progressivism redux: Ethos, policy, pathos", in A Kraak & M Young (eds.), *Education in retrospect: Policy and implementation since 1990*, HSRC and Institute of Education, University of London, 2001.

⁵⁵ Chisholm, L, Volmink, J, Ndhlovu, T, Potenza, E, Mohamed, H, Muller, J, Lubisi, C, Vinjevoold, P, Ngozi, L, Malan, B & Mphahlele, M, "A South African curriculum for the twenty first century: Report of the Review Committee on Curriculum 2005". Presented to the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, Pretoria, 31 May 2000.

⁵⁶ Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (Schools), Pretoria, Department of Education, 2002.

The overall direction of policy was now clear. The Revised National Curriculum Statement for Grades R-9 was to be implemented in 2004 and for Grades 10-12 in 2006. Changed teacher education policy had ensured that universities would be responsible for teacher education. The goals and values of education have changed considerably within the last ten years. As a consolidated, simplified and strengthened version of C2005, the Revised National Curriculum Statement, for better or worse, represents democratic South Africa's first national curriculum for schools. It is a product of history itself and its implementation will not be a smooth translation into practice. Interpretations of the curriculum, its representation, will continue to be struggled over.

The History/Archaeology Panel and the South African History Project

When professional historians registered their alarm and disapproval of Curriculum 2005 and its indifference to the study of the past,⁵⁷ Arnold Temu, who became President of the South African Historical Society in 1997, asked Martin Legassick to convene a panel to examine the teaching of history under Curriculum 2005.⁵⁸ The panel was put together involving people so diverse as Eddie Moloka, Peter Kapp, Uma Mesthrie and Peter Kallaway. They took the offensive with a statement, which appeared in the Pretoria based journal *Kleio*.⁵⁹ This encouraged many historians' interest in the question of history curriculum development and teacher development in the schools.

The critical historians found an interested listener and partner, in the new Minister of Education (from June 1999), Kader Asmal. Asmal, unmistakably, demonstrated a personal appreciation of the discipline and rapidly took steps to reverse the objectionable consequences of Curriculum 2005. He appointed a series of review committees and panels. In 1999 a ministerial review committee chaired by Linda Chisholm revisited Curriculum 2005 and insisted that the teaching of history was vital to the school syllabus. It threw a "*lifeline to history*" and this was handed on to a Working Group on Values in Education, and in September 2000 especially to a History/Archaeology Panel as a sub-structure.⁶⁰ The Report of the Panel, backed by the Working Group, then led to the appointment of the members of the South African History Project, and the eloquent commitment by Asmal at its launch to "*the relevance of the past ... [to] the creation of a more liberated present*".⁶¹

The panel that led to The South African History Project was chaired by Njubalo Ndebele, Vice-Chancellor of UCT, and consisted predominantly of university historians, though also included Member of Parliament Pallo Jordan. June Bam, a history education theorist and a critic of the existing situation, together with Martin Legassick were invited to give evidence to the panel.⁶² They did an initial draft of the panel's report.⁶³

The report of the History/Archaeology Panel started by identifying the values of historical learning, and also identified serious problems in teaching history in the schools. Innovative

⁵⁷ Kros, Cynthia, *Curriculum 2005 and the end of History*, History Curriculum Research Project, Report No. 3, Cambridge University Press and History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1998; South African Historical Society, "Statement on the Implications of Curriculum 2005 for History Teaching in the Schools", *South African Historical Journal*, Vol. 38, May 1998.

⁵⁸ Legassick, Martin (interviewed by Alex Lichtenstein): "The Past and Present of Marxist Historiography in South Africa", *Radical History Review*, Issue 82, Winter 2002 pp. III—130, 2002.

⁵⁹ South African Historical Society, "Statement on the Implications of Curriculum 2005 for History Teaching in the Schools", *South African Historical Journal*, 38, May 1998, pp. 200-04.

⁶⁰ Sieborger, Rob, "History and the Emerging Nation: The South African Experience", *International Journal of Historical Learning Teaching and Research*, 1/1, December 2000, p. 4.

⁶¹ The report of the History/Archaeology Panel, the brief of the History Project, and Asmal's speech at its launch on 31 August 2001 are available at <http://education.pwv.gov.za>.

⁶² This happened shortly after they had both attended a conference in Denmark on history teaching in the schools.

⁶³ Report of the History Archaeology Panel to the Minister of Education, 14 December 2000.

practices were less prevalent than rote learning. History was discredited and no longer seen as a core learning subject. There were serious problems with the curriculum. Teacher training presented a real problem, with seriously incapacitated teachers. The report recommended strengthening the substance and scope of the curriculum, strengthening teacher training, and producing new materials. It also recommended the establishment of a National History Commission to monitor the process of transformation.

Kader Asmal has emphasised the importance of history-learning in the schools, as one of the best ways for the new nation to acquire the most appropriate set of values.

The History and Archaeology Report refers to the healing power of historical memory for human survival: “..the language of possibility for the future through a dialogue with the present of what could not be in the past”.⁶⁴

But the Report also recognises the complexities of reality, the fluidness of identity and therefore a need for a challenging history for learners on how the historical past has shaped the present. President Mbeki in 1998 emphasised the importance of historical understanding for breaking the shackles of enslavement through the recovery of cultures, languages and histories. This view of the importance of history informed among other initiatives also the establishment of the South African Democracy Education Trust’s Oral History Project, which captures the experiences, and memories of the struggle against apartheid.

The work of the History and Archaeology Panel and subsequently that of the South African History project constituted part of the Values in Education Initiative. Early in 2000 Professor Kader Asmal appointed a Working Group on Values in Education which produced a report entitled “Values, Education and Democracy” in April 2000. The report had a lot to say about the place of history in the promotion of core values that are essential for education and also for a thriving democracy.

The History and Archaeology Report summarises the point as follows:

*“Good history put to good use, including ‘the history of human evolution’, has a particularly fortifying role in the growth of human culture for ‘when taught by imaginative teachers, the richness of history has a greater capacity than any other discipline to promote reconciliation and reciprocal respect of a meaningful kind, because it encourages a knowledge of the other, the unknown and different’.”*⁶⁵

The South African History Project was launched on 27 August 2001 as a part of the Values in Education Initiative. The Values in Education initiative is also known as Programme No. 6 under Tirisano and it attempts to answer the question of what kind of learner does the Department of Education or the nation want to produce at the end of schooling.⁶⁶

The SAHP is actually two bodies, the Ministerial Committee on History (MCH) and the South African History Project (SAHP) based at the National Department of Education in Pretoria within the Directorate of Race and Values. The MCH is a voluntary Board and is responsible for providing the intellectual and strategic vision and direction of the SAHP. The MCH central task is to advise and assist the Education Ministry with the implementation of the strengthening of history in education in South Africa through the writing of textbooks and

⁶⁴ Ministry of Education, History and Archaeology Report, updated version, 2002, p. 6.

⁶⁵ The Report of the History and Archaeology Panel to the Minister of Education (Pretoria, Department of Education, January 2001), 3.

⁶⁶ Tirisano stands for working together to build a South African education and training system for the 21st century. The other five programmes are (i) HIV/aids (ii) school effectiveness and educator professionalism (iii) Literacy (iv) FET (v) Organisational effectiveness of the national and provincial departments. Much progress was reported in the review of the implementation plan. The Director General Mr Thami Mseleku gave an evaluation of the achievements, failures and challenges in implementing Tirisano. See *Implementation Plan for Tirisano, 2001-2002* (Pretoria: DoE, 2001).

oral history, advocacy and communication, educator development and curriculum development.⁶⁷

The History and Archaeology Panel Report highlighted five key points. Firstly, a study of history is not only an educational imperative but also as a vital aid against amnesia, and a warning against any triumphalism of the present. Secondly, it elucidated that historical studies are experiencing a deep-seated and systemic crisis at various teaching and learning levels. Thirdly, it reported on the mixed quality of teaching in schools, focusing on teacher skills and capacity and on the recent marginalisation of the status of history in learning. Fourthly, it pinpointed that history is deprived of the space and scholarly stature it needs in order to play its full role in changing racial and other mythologies that are still prevalent in society. The fifth point is that there are serious deficiencies in teacher training and capacity shortages that militates against the growth of improved teaching methods in schools. The final point highlights the urgent need for the provision of better learner support materials for schools including textbooks. The report concludes with recommendations beginning with strengthening the substance and scope of the curriculum, strengthening of teacher training and the building of overall capacity.

During the period March to May 2002 the SAHP toured all the nine provinces consulting with teachers on their needs as educators of history. The provincial teachers conferences initiated the process of establishing a History Teachers Network and prepared for a national history teachers' workshop. A critical finding from the following workshops was that the majority of history teachers were either unqualified or under qualified. In some cases Geography teachers teach History or are appointed as subject Heads for History. Teachers of history in South Africa come from different backgrounds and have lived through different experiences of history. The majoritarian memory of oppression does not count for everybody. Therefore teaching about the past is essentially controversial, because it is constructed for a purpose and within the context of perceptions of the present relating to identity-creating elements like experience, memory, agency, identity, conflicting group interests, ethics, values, family, peers, mass media, cultures and subcultures, generational influences, religion, prejudice and pre-understanding. There are many agencies and hidden variables that can be said to contribute to historical consciousness. Many teachers are still trying to avoid teaching about apartheid. This has also emerged from the roundtables held in all nine provinces in 2002. One teacher asserted that she would rather avoid teaching South African history and will do America and so forth, as doing Apartheid is "killing the horse". She insisted that: "...we must remove the emotion from history, as we may lose the learners". Gauteng province has taken some initiatives to change this kind of attitude, through focusing on the Apartheid Museum and providing teachers with guidelines on methodology.

The idea of outcomes-based education is to focus on doing history. Some advocates that its central contribution to the study of history in schools is to shift the trend from content based towards introducing the historian's craft in the classroom. It will thereby be learner centred, it will integrate high skills with content, it will be resource based/source based. Some of the underlying principles for the shaping of the national history examination process initiated from 2003 are laid out as:

- The point of departure aims at reflecting a strong South African identity and place in the continental and global context.

⁶⁷ Seleti, Yonah, "Prospects and Challenges for the New School History Curriculum", In Conference Book Publication: Hans Erik Stolten (ed.): *History-Making and Present Day Politics. The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*, Forthcoming, NAI.

- The importance of Southern Africa and Africa in general should be given recognition.
- The transition processes will be based on the interim core syllabus.
- This process takes into cognisance the constraints and challenges under which educators and learners operate.
- These processes allow for a gradual developmental shift towards the outcomes based approach.
- There is an understanding that History encourages and assists constructive debate through careful evaluation of evidence and a range of points of view.
- That historical truth consists of a multiplicity of voices expressing varying and often contradictory versions of the same history.
- That the discipline of History involves the construction of knowledge based on evidence gained from a wide variety of sources: written, oral, visual and material.

A project on the turning points in South Africa's History has been initiated, looking at identity and perspectives. A textbook for all schools on ten years of freedom is also being completed for 2004.

A success for the new curriculum will require that the rich body of South African historiography must be integrated in the school history education. The dichotomy between school history and university history continue to perpetuate silo mentalities that contributed to the fall in the status and role of history as a discipline in society. The issue of presenting many perspectives of the past in the classroom requires the involvement of the experts in their fields of research to write in simple and accessible language for learners in schools. Only few innovative suggestions have been made to do something about the absence of professional historians in school-based curriculum.

The limited engagement of professional historians with the school history education is a serious problem. What are the reasons that have created this gulf between history educators in schools and professional historians in institutions of higher learning? During the tours around provinces to introduce the SAHP and commence the work of establishing a History Teachers Network, very few educators from institutions of higher learning attended these workshops. Only a handful of academics in Bloemfontein, Rustenburg, Polokwane, and Cape Town attended the workshops. The professional historians could play a critical role in advocacy work raising the morale of history educators in the school system.

A thesis by Lewin explores debates on history teaching in South Africa, pertaining to classroom practice, the discipline of history and pedagogy: the debates about what is possible for history teaching are complex and sometimes emotional. She argues that teachers are clearly convinced about the important role history can play in social and political projects, but the challenge for teachers is to work with a curriculum that has an explicit political expectation about this from them. Lewin maintains that in order to move away from the legacy of apartheid history education, and a great deal of Eurocentric content dumped down during the time when teachers were learners themselves, teachers would have to grapple with a reflection on alternative historiographies.⁶⁸

As a minor but not unimportant initiative, the Minister has secured copyright to the UNESCO volumes on a General History of Africa, to be distributed to FET schools along with supplementary and updated materials, including South Africa's recent history.

⁶⁸ Lewin quoted in Bam, June: "Making history the South African way: allowing the pieces to fall together", In Conference Book Publication: Hans Erik Stolten (ed.): *History-Making and Present Day Politics. The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*, Forthcoming, NAI.

South African Democracy Education Trust

One of the flagships in the area of history in the new South Africa gained strength during the debate on history in the schools. At the University of California in Los Angeles in 1964-66, Ben Magubane was a graduate student working on anti-apartheid activity. Magubane became a professor at the University of Connecticut and retired back to South Africa in the mid 1990s. He was asked to direct the South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), a presidential project with the aim of researching the struggle for democracy between 1960 and 1994.

The President himself launched the South African Democracy Education Trust, to write the history of the liberation struggle in the interests of greater knowledge of the recent past, again in the interest of *“reconciliation and nation-building”*. The SADET project was initially imagined as merely the history of the ANC. It was later broadened to become the story of *“the road to democracy”*. Some critics still worry that the product will be seen as constituting a new *“official history”* of the new *“nation”*.⁶⁹

The supervising board of SADET consists of representatives of the donors, MTN and Nedbank, together with the Minister for National Intelligence, Lindiwe Sisulu, the Minister in the Presidents Office, Essop Pahad, and military generals. It is a rather curious board to be supervising an academic project. Essop Pahad for example, who has a doctorate in history from the University of Sussex, also spent years in Prague on the staff of the Communist World Marxist Review. There have until now however been no reports on prescriptions from the board on the content of the productions.

There are various consortia involved in SADET, in Pretoria, at Wits, in Natal, at Fort Hare, etc. In the Western Cape a committee has at various times included Martin Legassick, Chris Saunders, Jeremy Seekings, Siphso Maseko, Sean Field, Mohammed Adhikari, Uma Mesthrie, Harriet Deacon, Noel Solani, Barry Feinberg and Lungisile Ntsebeza.

In 2001, the Western Cape group of historians under SADET concentrated mainly on the 25th anniversary of the Soweto uprising, and did research on what happened in the schools. A number of interviews were done with activists and journalists of the time. This resulted in the production of an exhibition, which was launched at a public meeting in Gugulethu on August 11th, the anniversary of the date of student marches in Langa and Gugulethu.

In 2002, they concentrated on research on the 1960s, doing dozens of interviews with activists of the time, together with research on trial records, etc. This was done for a book on the 1960s produced by SADET nationally. It will be followed by books on the 1970s and 1980s, and volumes of interviews. There is between the historians a certain tension as to the extent to which the books will represent *“history from above”*, of organisational elites, or *“history from below”* with the stories of ordinary activists.

Heritage and historical consciousness

Despite all kinds of defeatism, history in South Africa is very much alive. Strangely enough, there is among whites - parallel with subconscious tendencies to forget - much romantic nostalgia for times past. Heritage and popular history arouse as much interest as ever, as could be seen, for example, in the flood of books published to mark the centenary of the South African Anglo-Boer War. Initially, the government would have nothing to do with the commemoration of the war, because it was mainly fought between whites. The government's decision to participate anyway was made in the interests of reconciliation in the new nation. By emphasising the importance of blacks during the war, which had been neglected; the government wanted to make the commemorations more inclusive and to move towards a consensus view of the war.

⁶⁹ Christopher Saunders, *“History and the ‘Nation’: South African Aspects”*, lexical article, 2001.

Heritage studies - “*that ultimate commodification of history in pursuit of the tourist dollar*”⁷⁰ - has been a growth area also at South African universities, and in Guy’s words:

“*..the Heritage Industry invokes a sentimentalised past which makes bearable a sordid and painful present*”.⁷¹

The tension between memory and history is also articulated in the sphere of higher education, between practising historians. Bundy refers to the contribution by Mahmood Mamdani on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as historical understanding, in the way that it has the potential to shape this understanding of South Africa’s history and also its limitations as such a history.

Ironically, it is evidently so that the experience of Apartheid, gives purpose and meaning in the anticipation for the future, as manifested for example in the public acts of memory, heritage sites and museums and it is therefore also a major reference point for historians and history teachers.⁷² The obvious rationale being that in order to learn you have to remember as not to repeat.

All of these debates and experiences point to the humanising potential of history in the South African case at present. For Albie Sachs, the TRC helped to humanise South Africa’s painful past “*...as experiential truth is absolutely powerful and massive and vivid for a great many people*”. Politicians keenly interested in education, such as Naledi Pandor, highlights the need for teachers to not avoid for instance the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, and to acquire the skills to teach about South Africa’s recent past as this knowledge is crucial in shaping an informed future South Africa.

Applied history

There are other possibilities for historians to use their skills in nation building practices. Martin Legassick from University of Western Cape is a good example of a historian with a lifetime engagement in liberation history, now trying in a very productive way to complete the task in the new South Africa.⁷³ He has developed a concept for contemporary historical research, which he calls “applied history”. This approach shows enlightening examples of how ordinary people’s history connects to present day conflicts in administration and politics. Methodically this kind of applied history looks very interesting, involving a genuine multidisciplinary perspective proving the usefulness of history in present practical matters. Basically Legassick’s and many other radical historians’ engagement in, and political use of history have always been applied history, and this new angle might be a logical continuation of their endeavour for social justice and for a more progressive way of nationbuilding.⁷⁴

In November 2000, a ceremony took place formally handing back the land in District Six to its former residents, forcibly removed by the apartheid regime in the 1970s. President Thabo Mbeki spoke among others. This meeting was held shortly before local elections in Cape Town and was attended by hundreds of former residents and their families. It was research

⁷⁰ Cobley, Alan, “Does Social History Have a Future? The Ending of Apartheid and Recent Trends in South African Historiography”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 27/3, September 2001, p. 618.

⁷¹ Guy, Jeff, “Battling with Banality”, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, Vol. 18, pp. 156-193.

⁷² McEachern Charmaine, “Working with Memory: The District Six Museum in South Africa”, in *Social Analysis*, University of Adelaide, Issue 42/2, July 1998.

⁷³ Legassick, Martin (interviewed by Alex Lichtenstein), “The Past and Present of Marxist Historiography in South Africa”, *Radical History Review*, Issue 82, Winter 2002 pp. III—130, 2002, Website:

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/radical_history_review/v082/82.1legassick.html. Legassick himself express a critical view to the Alliance.

⁷⁴ Legassick, Martin, “Reflections on practising applied history in South Africa, 1994-2002: from skeletons to schools”, in Conference Publication: Hans Erik Stolten (ed.): *History-Making and Present Day Politics. The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*, Forthcoming.

carried out by a team of historians, directed by Martin Legassick, which enabled this ceremony to take place. In eight months his team conducted more than 1400 interviews and verified almost 700 claims.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, political decisions have not lived up to the research results. Although this research was completed in August 2000 and despite the “handing over” ceremony in November that year, as of mid-2003, no former tenants had moved back to District Six, nor had any houses been built.

One can hope that this kind of applied history will be able to bring historians out of the “ivory tower” of academia into the real world of people. In the known cases, it has often been into communities of “claimants”, people with a specific and instrumental interest in history. Research in historical injustices can be used to satisfy the wronged and actively create equality and human rights.

Nevertheless, the question remains: While historians have a duty to expose the distortions of the past, do they also have a role in creating a new, “useful” history for a new democratic South African nation?

Considering the extremely dissimilar and multi-cultural nature of South African society, with its abused history, and severe social gaps, it is not clear at all how a nation-building project, with its emphasis on a common pathway, can overcome the divisions and accommodate the multi-culturalism.

The Historians and the Struggle for a Better South Africa

What role can historians and historical studies play in post-apartheid South Africa on this background?

Some historians seem to think that there has been a deliberate attempt since 1994 to downplay history, to remove it from the schools, to subordinate under other subjects as part of a demobilisation campaign to preserve and protect the government against critique. Imagined or not, there is the beginnings of a fight back against that.

What can be observed throughout South African history is the merging of race and class. That underneath the racial tensions there are class conflicts. There is a lot of emphasis being placed by the ANC-government on the elimination of white racism, as there should be of course.

However, it is hardly possible to eliminate racism without eliminating the material conditions that underpin racism. Racism is not a question simply of politically correct language. It is a question of solving the problems of poverty that is required in order to get rid of racism.

Despite its election slogans “*end poverty*,” and “*fight poverty*” which has shown to be mostly rhetoric, the government is not prepared to put out the money to solve the poverty problem.

The indications are that the black poor in South Africa are getting poorer and the white rich are staying rich. So, what progressive historians still can do is to constantly highlight the class factors, which are underpinning the race tensions.

It is impossible to predict which direction black historiography will take. Even if the situation in the South African society develops in the best way possible, i.e. towards a reasonably harmonious socially and stable pluralistic system, which is probably an optimistic expectation, the black population will continue, although from a better position, to have to fight for its rights and opportunities. One can hope that continued engagement in the struggle for equal political and economic rights, even within historiography, will adhere to topics such as black consciousness and national sovereignty, the forms of white exploitation, and the organisational history of the resistance struggle.

The matter of a fruitful union of scientific work and political engagement are central to South African historiography. For example, how can support for the previous freedom movement

⁷⁵ M. Legassick, “District Six tenant’s claims verification research”, UWC, August 2000.

organisations, including the ANC, and historical research be combined in a creative manner, now that these organisations constitutes a government with a neo-liberal agenda?

There is, of course, a fundamental truth in the idea that history is created by people, but the notion that this process takes place through an equal realisation of individual acts of will, are based in pure idealism. In South Africa, the most recent history was to a great extent created through the collective initiatives of the national freedom movement. The formulation of viable strategies and the calculation of political possibilities unconditionally demand structural analysis as their basis. And that regardless of how deep a sensitivity the movement has otherwise for the personal human experiences with the oppressive system, or for the membership's will for social and political mobilisation. That does not provide sufficient historical understanding.

Good insight into the feelings and needs of the people should originate directly from the political organisations. Structural analysis does not, and should therefore be a top priority for historical and other researchers who wish to contribute to the liberation process and democratic build-up.

The discussion between the democratic government, the popular organisations and progressive researchers on research prioritisation should be done on an on-going basis. Experiences so far indicates that if the universities do not understand how to make themselves relevant to the building of a new South Africa, they will simply become economically deprioritised for the benefit of instruction at lower levels. If one compares the lack of deep historical and social research under the aegis of the ANC with its large amounts of excellent public information materials, it will be clear that this also reflects the earlier prioritisations of the ANC. Present World Bank strategies show the same agenda.

It should be clear now that for the nation building purpose of creating a common ground for all South Africans, the past is not entirely unproblematic. Instead, it seems that it is easier to construct a common ground in symbols which do not have a direct link to the past, for example by choosing fairly abstract and "neutral" symbols of patriotism. History might still be highlighted as important in more or less official documents, but "new patriotism" is stressed more concretely.⁷⁶ And this new national identity does not seem to have its base in a shared perception of the apartheid past, but instead in an elite view of a South Africa adjusted to "universal" values and the 21st century marketplace.

The Values forming "the South African idea" as depicted in *the Manifesto*, seem to be based on two notions, both very important, but seemingly different – "reconciliation" and "the new patriotism".

Dealing with the past can be seen to create different types of nation building. As Ray has shown early post-apartheid efforts were often aimed at using the past as a uniting factor. Concentrating on the future seems to be the way the South African government has chosen later. The present nation building exercise is done through cultivating skills needed in an economic and market based context as well as in an increasingly globalised environment. As a result, history has been marginalised.⁷⁷

Some history departments at South African universities are responding with hard work and similar creativity to challenges, while others are not, and several are in a bad state of repair. Not all historians are ready to take up the challenges, fewer still may be around in the future

⁷⁶ *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy*, Ministry of Education, Tirisano Programme, Pretoria, August 2001.

⁷⁷ Ray, Giulia, "Creating the Future - Post-Apartheid Use of History Education for Nation Building Purposes", In Conference Book Publication: Hans Erik Stolten (ed.): *History-Making and Present Day Politics. The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*, Forthcoming, NAI.

to shape even debates and policies outside of academic historiography. The reasons for this are complex.⁷⁸ Many historians of Southern Africa live abroad; partly because the funding for teacher training dried up in the late 90s; partly because the take-up of history as a career by black intellectuals has been so limited, it appears as if “history” as a genre of human thought production, is under siege.

⁷⁸ Burns, Catherine: “A useable past: the search for ‘history in chords’”, In Conference Book Publication: Hans Erik Stolten (ed.): *History-Making and Present Day Politics. The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*, Forthcoming, NAI.