

# PARADIGMATIC CONFUSION IN THE HISTORY OF THE 'NEW SOUTH AFRICA'

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## OPSOMMING

Post-apartheid Suid-Afrika is in baie opsigte 'n verwarrende kosmos van hoop en geleentehede aan die een kant en talle onsekerhede aan die ander kant. Hierdie bewussyn word ook in die dissipline van Geskiedenis weerspieël. Historici word opnuut gekonfronteer met die taak om die konseptuele metodologiese grondslae van die dissipline krities te oriënteer. Gedurende die vorige dekades was die geskiedskrywing hier ter plaatse hoofsaaklik daarop gerig om die apartheidsamelewing óf te verdedig óf te vernietig. Die gebruik van geskiedskrywing as 'n wapen het uiteraard die tradisionele aard van geskiedenis ondermyn. Terselfdertyd het die toenemend eensydige aanspraak van die Marxistiese, Liberale en Afrikaner Nasionalistiese rigtings gedurende die apartheidsera enige aanspraak op historiese objektiwiteit in Suid-Afrika vernietig. Hierdie referaat betoog dat die oorlog teen apartheid verby is. Historici moet hul ideologiese wapenuitrusting en behefte aan wraak opsysit en opnuut kyk na hul primêre taak. Met beter begrip vir die Suid-Afrikaanse toestand, asook deur bewus te wees van onlangse tendense in wêreldgeskiedenis, sal historici hul navorsingsparadigma in so 'n mate kan aanpas dat 'n 'Nuwe Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis' — 'n geskiedenis vry van vervolging daargestel kan word.

## INTRODUCTION

This work challenges the claims of those historians who believe they have deciphered the social hieroglyphic. It disputes the view that one can engineer the human soul by means of an objective, linear, materialist, behaviouralist, universalist, rational or other supposedly scientific methodology. It is guided by the conviction that attempts to locate and master the mainsprings of human conduct are as logical as St. Exupery's bookkeeper believing he could count and thereby control the stars.<sup>1</sup>

It therefore supports the vision of J.W. von Goethe and the romantics who argued that ideologies dependent upon rational and logi-

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Antoine De Saint-Exupery, *Le Petit Prince* (1946).

cal human behaviour (i.e., mechanical causation) could never replace religious and mystical (i.e., teleological) explanations of humanity. It suggests that Marxism, liberalism and Afrikaner nationalism, which profess to provide scientific and objective explanations of societal behaviour, are themselves metaphysical doctrines, if only because their principal focus is on redemptive and utopian solutions for South Africa.

South Africans have trailed behind in the process of global transformation, a lethargy for which the apartheid years were greatly responsible. This peripheralised nation has been slow to respond to outside influences, with a marked tendency to suffer from cultural 'lags' — the "propensity of attitudes and perceptions to lag behind changing reality sometimes by years, sometimes by decades, discarded only when the implications threaten disaster".<sup>2</sup> This parochial mentality has been particularly evident in the discipline of history.

Part of the problem has been the punitive nature of South African history. The effects of apartheid can be seen in the distorted historiography of this era during which zero-sum or conflict history dominated interpretation. From the 1970s onwards the struggle against apartheid intensified and history became one of the foremost weapons in this conflict. In following decades historical objectivity was sacrificed on the altar of "high strategy and low tactics" with many historians believing, along with Churchill, that in times of war it was necessary to surround the truth with a "bodyguard of lies".<sup>3</sup>

John Wright, David Yudelman and others have noted that, because of the struggle against apartheid, the major debates in South African history became increasingly ideological rather than historical:

The importance of history as an ideological weapon hardly needs stressing. It is a safe generalization that all political groups, whether dominant or dominated, invariably seek to legitimize their particular

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<sup>2</sup> Dudley Seers, *The political economy of Nationalism*, (1983), p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> A. Cave Brown, *Bodyguard of Lies*, p. 247.

policies and practices by seeking precedents for them in the past. In the process they will, if necessary, re-shape and, if they can get away with it, invent the past to suit their purposes. At the same time they will be concerned to neutralize and, if possible, suppress or exorcize that knowledge of the past which informs the political projects of groups opposed to them. Control of the past is, in other words, always a political issue, and history is always a terrain of struggle.<sup>4</sup>

The effects of this politicised approach can clearly be seen in Afrikaner nationalist historiography and to a lesser extent in the counter-ideological position supporting liberalism and/or Friedmanite economics of Horwitz, Hutt, O'Dowd, Bromberger and Lipton.<sup>5</sup>

It was the revisionists (the general term for South African Marxist/radicals), however, who consciously forged academic debate into a weapon to use against their apartheid adversaries.

In its present incantation, revisionism has become increasingly revolutionary, couched in the elemental language of mass confronting elite, metropole confronting periphery and capitalism exploiting the people. Its style is teleological, abrasive, moralistic, impatient, eclectic, dismissive and often arrogant in terms of the transcendence and superiority of the Marxist dialectic. In the final analysis, though, the revisionist concern in South Africa has been societal transformation and the beneficiaries of the proposed revolution in South Africa:

Such questions as must there be a bourgeois revo-

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<sup>4</sup> John Wright, "Popularizing the precolonial past: politics and problems", History Workshop, Wits, February 1987; David Yudelman, "Capital, capitalists and power in South Africa: Some zero-sum fallacies", *Social Dynamics*, 6, 2, (1980).

<sup>5</sup> For the leading exponents of this view see W. H. Hutt, *The economics of the Colour Bar* (1964); R. Horwitz, *The political economy of South Africa* (1967); M. C. O'Dowd, "South Africa in the light of the stages of growth" in A. Leftwich (ed.), *South Africa: Economic growth and political change* (1974). Also his most recent work *South Africa: The growth imperative* (1991); N. Bromberger, "Economic growth and political change in South Africa" in Leftwich (ed.), *Economic growth*; and M. Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid South Africa, 1910—1986* (1986). For a more popularised approach see Peter L. Berger and Bobby Godsell, *A future South Africa. Visions, strategies and realities* (1988).

lution before the Socialist, can an authentic bourgeois revolution or acceptable substitute be achieved within constraints of economic dependence, and which alliance of indigenous social classes or fractions thereof holds out the best hopes for revolutionary change.<sup>6</sup>

The numerous academics who accepted positions in the ANC hierarchy have made their political affiliations obvious. These researchers clearly reject the traditional imperative that it is immoral and ahistorical to put history at the service of any social organisation or dogma.

For instance, André du Toit wrote of the 'Calvinist paradigm' and candidly admitted that this critique was part of his own present day political agenda.<sup>7</sup> Harold Wolpe's work, *Race, class and the Apartheid state* (1988) was commissioned by UNESCO as part of its struggle against apartheid. Wolpe wrote that the issues he wished to discuss were not merely theoretical, but "have a direct relevance to the formulation of political perspectives and objectives" in South Africa. Wolpe argued that it was necessary to examine those theoretical formulations which were relevant to "alternative political perspectives" in this country.

In terms of the foregoing, this paper argues that the global revolution that has led to intellectual ferment elsewhere, has had little effect on the discipline of history within South Africa. The result of South Africa's preoccupation with conflict-orientated approaches has been a sterile and deadlocked environment.

The final decade of the 20th Century has proved a global watershed. Existing political polarities have disappeared or been transformed. The crumbling of the Berlin Wall and the ideology that built and sustained that wall, the appeal of post-modernism, the bur-

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<sup>6</sup> Vicky Randall and Robin Theobald, *Political change and underdevelopment. A critical introduction to Third World politics* (1985), p. 138. See also Gianni Vattimo, *The end of modernity, nihilism and hermeneutics* (1988); John Holmwood and Alexander Stewart, *Explanation and social theory* (1991); and Andrew Heywood, *Political ideologies. An introduction* (1992).

<sup>7</sup> André du Toit, "Captive to the Nationalist paradigm. Prof. F. A. van Jaarsveld and his historical evidence for the Afrikaner's ideas on his calling and mission", *South African Historical Journal*, 16 (1984).

geoning of ethno-nationalism and genocidal tendencies, and the emergence of a new and non-racial South Africa, all point to the need for extensive historical revision.

There has been widespread dissatisfaction amongst South African historians with the distorted nature of their craft and there have been frequent calls for an end to zero-sum or conflict history.<sup>8</sup> A major change of mindset is the only way out of this historical impasse. The end of the apartheid era in 1994 liberated South Africa's population, both black and white; the black majority was released from the injustices of white minority rule, whilst the white population was freed from itself. In the New South Africa, history was also liberated from political agendas and the 'tyranny of the conventional'.

The war against apartheid is over. Historians need to put aside their ideological armoury and desire for vengeance and look anew at their calling. This paper is an attempt to expose the counterfactual positions adopted by the major schools in South African history, and view these parochial and out-dated conflicts in terms of recent trends in world history. It is hoped that a deeper understanding of the South African malaise and the possibility of new perspectives will provide inspiration for change.

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The pressing need for historical revision has been emphasised in a large number of works including B. Kantor and H. Kenny, "The poverty of neo-Marxism; the case of South Africa", *Journal for Southern African Studies*, 3, 1, (1976); David Yudelman, "Industrialization, race relations and change in South Africa: an ideological and academic debate", *African Affairs*, 74, 294, (1975) and "The quest for a neo-Marxist approach to contemporary South Africa", *South African Journal of Economics*, 45, 2, (1977). See also Yudelman's book review "Dan O'Meara's Afrikaner nationalism", *Social Dynamics*, 9, 1, (1983); D. Posel, "Rethinking the 'Race-class debate' in South African historiography" in the same issue of *Social Dynamics*; and John Lonsdale, "From colony to industrial state: South African historiography as seen from England" also in this issue of *Social Dynamics*. More recently, Donald H. Akenson, *God's peoples, covenant and land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster*, (1991); Nicoli Nattrass, "Controversies about capitalism and apartheid in South Africa; an economic perspective", *Journal for Southern African Studies*, 17, 4, (1991); John Bottomley, "The application of the theory of 'economic backwardness' to South Africa 1881-1924", *Journal of Economic History of South Africa*, 8, 2, (1993); and John L. Comaroff, "Ethnicity, Nationalism and the politics of difference in an age of revolution". Paper presented to South African Historical Society Conference, Rhodes University, 1993.

## HISTORIOGRAPHICAL OPENINGS AND ANALYTICAL CLOSURES IN THE POLITICIZED PAST

In the 1970s, South African historiography was stunned by the emergence of the revisionist school of history. The historical terrain at that time was dominated by those who supported the methodology of Leopold von Ranke (1795—1886), whilst their ideological and political opponents were classical liberal historians.

Von Ranke stressed the need to base historical interpretation on a close investigation of official records in order to write history, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, factually and without bias. As a post-Enlightenment historian, Von Ranke was concerned with achieving objectivity in a very imprecise discipline. The Rankean traditional paradigm was largely narrative, and this form, together with its dependence on institutional sources, produced history written from above. Rankean history was largely concerned with the deeds of great men, statesmen, generals, politicians — those whose achievements were celebrated in official records. The rest of humanity was allocated only a minor role in the drama of history.

It is easy to understand why the Rankean approach to history found a ready acceptance in apartheid-dominated South Africa. This 'top-down' paradigm suited those who sought to write history exclusively in terms of the official and largely white perspective. Reference to a multiracial and interdependent South African society was located in the unofficial and therefore unexamined realms of history.

Whilst Rankean thought became the refuge of mainly Afrikaner nationalist academics seeking to avoid growing criticism of their society, liberalism was the chosen ideology of their English-speaking opponents. There were many reasons why this constellation of social, political and economic thought became important. Liberalism was the predominant philosophy of the British Empire, and many liberals still revered their roots. Liberals also felt powerless in an Afrikaner-dominated South Africa and loathed their loss of freedom in a command economy.

They viewed liberalism with its emphasis on liberty, equality, constitutionalism, utilitarianism and a market economy (*laissez-faire*), as a combative ideology capable of granting some power to the

powerless. Excluded for decades from government and the service sector, English-speakers dominated commerce and industry and adopted that ideology which conveyed the interests of an alienated middle class.

The race-problem in South Africa was also conveniently explained by the liberal degeneracy paradigm — a myth by means of which commerce, industry and the English-speaking population were absolved from blame for apartheid. The liberals argued that the irrationality of apartheid was the result of a ‘primitive’ Calvinism and the isolation of a ‘backward Afrikanerdom’ on a hostile frontier.

It was on the frontier that the Afrikaners missed the Enlightenment and turned instead to the Old Testament rather than to Voltaire. Afrikaners thus developed “Israeli-like visions of a civilizing mission by a chosen people with a destiny in a sea of primitive heathen natives”.<sup>9</sup> By extension, the liberals believed that Afrikanerdom, because of its long African sojourn, was now psychologically incapable of adapting to the new industrial reality. The state had no alternative but to apply apartheid legislation in order to preserve government and service sector occupations for the many Afrikaner voters who became victims of industrialisation. The liberals, therefore, blamed a degenerate Afrikanerdom for the ‘economic irrationality’ of apartheid.<sup>10</sup>

Those who promoted the degeneracy paradigm in explanation of the mechanics of change in South Africa, were aided by another tenet of liberalism — the commitment to progress and an ‘infinite time ahead’. The liberals argued that whilst industrialisation often created inequalities and sharp cleavages along race, class and religious lines, these would be mitigated by future capitalist development. They contended that nothing empowered people like skills, education, housing, wealth — the benefits industrialisation would eventually bring.

Implicit in industrial progress was the emergence of a democratic

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Heribert Adam and Hermann Gilliomee, *Ethnic power mobilized. Can South Africa change?* (1979), p. 17.

John Bottomley, “Historiographical openings and analytical closures: a focus on the early modern period in the Transvaal, 1881—1924”. Paper presented to South African Historical Society conference, Rhodes University, 1995.

consensus in South Africa. The correlation between advancing socio-economic modernization and the emergence of democracy was so self-evident to the liberals as to be an 'evolutionary universal'. It is this belief that underlies Michael O'Dowd's *South Africa: The growth imperative* (1991) and Francis Fukuyama's *The end of History and the last man* (1992), both of which posit the final victory of liberalism over its ideological adversaries.<sup>11</sup>

Opponents of the liberal idea point to the inherent contradictions in this ideology. They argue that the problem of inequality is fundamental to liberalism, an ideology that encourages capitalist competitiveness. The result of this conflict is both local and international failure which liberalism has largely failed to address. The atomization and alienation of traditional communities is laid at the door of liberalism, as is underdevelopment in the Third World. Thus, these critics would argue, whilst all people are born free, they are certainly not born equal according to liberal ideology.

Critics also point out that it was possible for people professing liberal values to function within ruling systems based on supposedly antithetical social values. In 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain, for instance, the liberals formed a narrow social elite, and whilst professing liberal values, were content to deny those same values to other classes. Liberalism encourages conformity and gradual transformation. Critics of liberalism contend that the bourgeoisie will always perform an internal cost-analysis which will provide them with reasons for supporting the *status quo*. They argue this was particularly true of the South African situation in which liberals were provided with a cheap, unskilled labour force. It was, therefore, not in the economic interests of liberals to attack apartheid.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Before making such extravagant claims these historians would have done well to have read T. S. Eliot's *Gerontion* written in 1920:

Think now  
 History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
 And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,  
 Guides us by vanities. Think now...  
 We have not reached conclusion.

*The complete poems and plays of T. S. Eliot*, (1978 edition), p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Burke (ed.), *New perspectives on historical writing* (1991); Ken Smith, *The changing past. Trends in South African historical writing* (1988), pp. 103—150; R. Robinson, J. Gallagher and A. Denny, *Africa and the Victorians. The official mind of imperialism* (1981), preface; Jeffrey Butler, Richard Elphick and David Welsh,



As proof of this contention, critics point out that liberal academia in South Africa was dominated by Eurocentric and paternalistic narrative and was thus, "long on morality and short on explanation".<sup>13</sup> Although some liberals moved away from political history towards an interdisciplinary approach, they were constrained, argued their critics, by the lack of a conflict-orientated structural paradigm and their inherent white liberal prejudices. No such constraints applied to the revisionists who followed.

In the early 1970s, directional, structural and confrontational history came to South Africa. The revisionists were influenced by that optimistic intensification of the 'Enlightenment project' which occurred in Europe and America during the previous two decades; the widespread belief that it was possible to quantify social occurrences and formulate rigorous laws of social behaviour.

It is ironic that this ideological transfer occurred at the tail end of the movement elsewhere and came to South Africa when determinist models of behaviour were being rejected. Above all else, the determinist belief in the linearity and predictability of change was repudiated. Ardent and enthusiastic forecasts of social behaviour made in earlier decades were proving demonstrably wrong in the face of the unpredictable consequences of political events and social realities. This was particularly true of the optimistic forecasts of benefits that would accrue from independence in Africa.<sup>14</sup>

The collapse of determinist models proposed by the Marxists and functionalists led to a crisis in social theory and to the complete revision of existing tools of research from the 1970s onwards. This re-orientation of historical methodology has yet to occur in South Africa, which is still dominated by zero-sum and adversarial history.

The success and longevity of the revisionist approach to South African history must be seen in terms of its utility-value and success as a weapon against apartheid. Whereas the liberals had been

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*Democratic liberalism in South Africa: its history and prospect* (1987) and John Lonsdale's review of this book in *Social Dynamics*, 14, 2, (1988). Also Bottomley, "Historiographical openings".

<sup>13</sup> K. R. Hughes in K. Smith, *Changing past*, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> Burke (ed.), *New perspectives*, and Randall and Theobald, *Political change*.

content with a consensus model of history and often saw the value of their discipline in terms of its rhetorical and aesthetic purpose, the new historians were very different. The revisionists were determined to take the lead in opposing apartheid by influencing political change, rather than merely reflecting social opinion as so many liberals had done.

The structuralism of the revisionists supplanted the narrative approach of the Rankeans. A belief in cultural relativity often went hand in hand with this new structuralism — the conviction that all reality and especially the discipline of history is relative and either socially or culturally constituted. This was another contention that was to have far-reaching effects on South African history.

Many revisionists argue that our minds do not reflect reality directly. We perceive the world only through a network of conventions, schemata and stereotypes, a network that varies in different cultures and different eras.<sup>15</sup> The sharing of this assumption by revisionists and social scientists in other disciplines helps explain the growing commitment to inter-disciplinary research. Historical relativism has thus undermined traditional distinctions about the nature, purpose and uniqueness of history.

The revisionist commitment to structuralism and an examination of 'history from below' has also influenced our opinion of what constitutes historical sources. Whilst the Rankeans and liberals were largely content with official documentation, the revisionists turned to an examination of social and cultural trends in an effort to comprehend what had happened to the multiracial and ignored majority in South Africa. These trends could not be analysed in the same way as political events.

The determination of the revisionists to take the views of ordinary people into account has ensured that the world of history expanded at an enormous rate. Historians now rely on oral evidence, microhistory and econometrics. There is women's history, the history of everyday life, popular culture, labour history, urban and rural history to name but a few of the new fields attracting historians

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<sup>15</sup> Burke (ed.), *New perspectives*, pp. 3—6.

in their search for evidence.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this expanding and fragmenting universe, there is an increasing need for orientation in history. The new 'history from below' has enormous problems — problems of definition, sources, method, explanation and objectivity. Perhaps the greatest problem facing South African revisionists, though, is the analytic utility of the Marxist paradigm that unites this school of historians. The essential question is whether Marxist meta-theory is effective as an absolute paradigm explaining social transformation in South Africa.

In the final analysis, the methodological contentions of South African revisionists remain bound by the ideological and teleological constraints of Marxism. In order to understand the effects of this ideology on the practice of history in South Africa, we must return to the mainsprings of Marxist theory in the Greco-Roman-Christian *Weltanschauung* or cosmology.

### **THE PHILOSOPHICAL MAINSPRINGS OF THE PRESENT IMPASSE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY IN THE GREACO-ROMAN-CHRISTIAN *WELTANSCHAUUNG*/ COSMOLOGY**

Throughout recorded time, the central philosophical concern has been that dilemma first illuminated by the ancient Greeks; the determination of absolute/objective values in a relative world. Each culture believes its particular beliefs correspond to some sort of external reality. Plato (427—347BC) responded to this dualism by proposing an external world of forms or absolutes. The Christians were later to interpret this other-world as heaven. St. Augustine (354—430AD), one of the patristic authorities whose work codified the teachings of Jesus Christ, developed a neo-Platonic vision. For this seminal philosopher, faith and the belief in life after death were the absolute/ objective values defining the temporal existence of Christians. Augustinian neo-Platonism was to determine the teleological goals of the Christian world for some 1000 years between the fall of Rome and the Enlightenment.

This cosmological commitment to faith came to an end as a result of the Renaissance, Reformation and 16<sup>th</sup> Century Scientific

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher Lloyd, *The structures of history* (1993).

the source of all conflict would be removed.<sup>18</sup>

Despite calling itself scientific, the Marxist belief that society is essentially conflict-driven and can only be transformed into a better world by further conflict is itself metaphysical, both in terms of its assessment of the nature and workings of society, and its focus on a specific Utopian solution. It has been pointed out that historians who are attracted to this hostile and superficially pragmatic ideology are largely radical secularists with little inclination for metaphysics.<sup>19</sup> These historians are lured by action and conflict-orientated models of human behaviour, rather than models which stress consensus through negotiation.

The notion that science provides an objective and value-free method of advancing true knowledge, thus releasing humanity from its enslavement to 'irrational ideologies' has been one of the most enduring myths of modern times.<sup>20</sup> It is a theoretical formulation that is also an analytical closure. At issue is the problem of defining what is scientific and objective and what is irrational and subjective.

Many Enlightenment thinkers argued that all knowledge should come from experience and direct observation, as was proposed in the scientific methodology of Bacon and Descartes. They thus denied the validity of any knowledge gained through the senses, imagination, authority, tradition or purely theoretical reasoning. The positivists regarded such fields as art, morality, religion, metaphysics and 'romantic' history as unverifiable and therefore irrelevant.<sup>21</sup>

The Marxists took this approach a stage further and thereby created a limiting nexus that has undermined much of their work in South Africa. Marx considered the material base of society determined all other aspects, from social relations and political forms to law, morality and knowledge itself. He specifically excluded idea-

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<sup>18</sup> David Harvey, *The culture of Modernity. An enquiry into the origins of cultural change* (1989), p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Giovanni Levy, "On Micro history", in Burke (ed.), *New perspectives*, p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies* (1992), p. 295.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Goodwin, *Using political ideas* (1992). Nicholas Abercrombie, *The dominant ideology thesis* (1980).

tional phenomena from his paradigm because he regarded ideologies as epiphenomenon or false consciousness.

Marx saw Ideology as a major instrument of repression in the hands of the ruling class, used to deceive and subordinate classes about the true nature of capitalism and to perpetuate the bourgeois standpoint. For Marx, legitimising ideologies were no more than a particular convergence of class interests.

The central issue is what is defined as ideological and how ideas relate to material reality. In South African history the revisionists, following Marx, also deny any independent role or ontological status outside of the material base of society to such ideational expressions of social reality as feudal, clientist, ethnic, regional, parochial or national alliances.

This denial or limitation of ideational phenomena to materialist interpretation has led to the abstraction of all economic actions from the values and beliefs of those who perform them i.e., Marx's utility maximizing 'economic man'. The most cogent criticism of the Marxist approach to ideology and the belief that ideational values pollute the rational scientific process remains that of E. Young in *Night Thoughts*, published during the Enlightenment, when he asked, "are passions then, the pagans of the soul? Reason alone baptized?"<sup>22</sup>

The effect of the materialist dialectic on South African history has been a sterile reductionism. For instance, both O'Meara and Wolpe deny that ideational phenomena including ideas, ideologies, cultural values, belief systems and ethnicity have been either powerful or independent determinants of South African history. These were either forms of 'false consciousness' or legitimising ideologies disputing and determining material relations. Thus O'Meara argues, "bourgeois politics and ideology were mere reflections of struggle within the capitalist state to secure the dominance of monopoly capital and ensure its profitable operation".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> E. Young, *Night thoughts* (1744), Night vi, p. 298; Heywood, *Political ideologies*, p. 547; Vattimo, *End of Modernity*; and Eduardo Giannetti Da Fonseca, *Beliefs in action, economic philosophy and social change* (1991), p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> Dan O'Meara, *Volkskapitalismè: Class, capital and ideology in the development of Afrikaner nationalism 1934—1948* (1983), p. 21.

Wolpe goes further than O'Meara and argues that O'Meara was unnecessarily reductionist in dividing the determinants of South African society into two autonomous spheres — a racial order (with all its ideational elements) and a class structure. This was as far as Wolpe was prepared to go in transforming the materialist dialectic. Despite arguing against two separate determinants of social transformation, Wolpe falls back on the revisionist fall-guy, in accusing those who support an independent role for ideology as being under the sway of German historicism. Thus, despite granting autonomy to class as a societal determinant, Wolpe denies such autonomy to ideology and continues to argue that all ideology is merely a superstructural function of material relations which alone defined the nature of South African society.<sup>24</sup>

The practical effects of this denial of ideational phenomena are that capitalism is portrayed as the villain in South Africa and the real cause of apartheid. Elements such as nationalism, ethnicity or unadulterated racism are granted only a very superficial role in determining the racial structure. Yet, as Geoff Eley has argued, "there is sense in which *any* attempt to theorize the social history of Africa during the last hundred years is at some level a discussion of nationalism".<sup>25</sup> Tom Nairn concludes that because of its dismissal of ideational phenomenon, "the theory of nationalism represents Marxism's great historical failure".<sup>26</sup> Whilst Saul Dubow points to "the general state of amnesia about racist ideas in western thought",<sup>27</sup> J. M. Coetzee has gone even further in arguing that the self-imposed limitations of historical scholarship in South Africa have prevented an understanding of the 'mind of apartheid' or 'lair of the heart', which he believes are critical in understanding the creation of an apartheid ideology.<sup>28</sup>

A concomitant and equally important effect of the narrow revisionist focus is that social, racial and ethnic movements such as poor

<sup>24</sup> Harold Wolpe, *Race, class and the Apartheid state*, (1988), pp. 1-10.

<sup>25</sup> Geoff Eley, "Nationalism and social history", *Social History*, 6, 1 (1981).

<sup>26</sup> Tom Nairn, "The Modern Janus", *New Left Review*, 94, (1974).

<sup>27</sup> Saul Dubow, "Afrikaner nationalism, apartheid and the conceptualisation of race" *Journal of African History*, 33, (1992).

<sup>28</sup> J. M. Coetzee, "The mind of apartheid: Geoffrey Cronje (1907—)", *Social Dynamics*, 17, 1 (1991).

whiteism are largely excluded from revisionist analysis because they reflect a 'false consciousness' instead of the particular paradigm the materialists would advance. Poor whiteism, however, included close to 50 percent of the Afrikaner population by the mid-1930s and was obviously a crucial factor in the march towards an apartheid South Africa.<sup>29</sup>

## CONCLUSION

South African historiography in the mid-1990s is "like a highway filled with angry drivers cursing each other and telling each other they didn't know how to drive when the real trouble was the highway itself".<sup>30</sup> As a result of apartheid, South Africans failed to relate to world-wide trends in history. We are still fighting our parochial battles when these same contentious issues have been dealt with and dissipated globally.

Elsewhere in the world, historians have largely accepted the failure of what Habermas called 'the Enlightenment project'.<sup>31</sup> The predominating belief in reason as defined by the positivists, universal and objective values, and the ineluctability of progress all collapsed during the latter part of the 20th Century. There has been a rejection of 'stages of growth' and meta-theories (especially Marxism) that rested on Enlightenment absolutes.

We now live in an age of relativism with all its painful uncertainties and without an authentic metaphysical, humanistic or technical reality in which to believe.<sup>32</sup> This realisation has yet to filter down to the level of historical research or to affect historical interpretation in South Africa.

The decades of *angst* that turned history into a weapon have passed. Today, as Giovanni Levy suggests,

the most attractive models of historical explanation are those which emphasize the freedom of choice of ordinary people, their strategies, their capacity to exploit the inconsistencies or incoherences of social

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<sup>29</sup> John Bottomley, "Public policy and White rural poverty in South Africa, 1881—1924". Ph.D thesis, Queen's University, 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Pirsig, Lila, p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> J. Habermas, *The philosophical discourse on modernity* (1987), p. 104.

<sup>32</sup> Vattimo, *End of Modernity*, p. xxv.

or political systems, to find loopholes through which they can wriggle or interstices in which they can survive.<sup>33</sup>

The traditional agreement about what constitutes good historical explanation and historical objectivity has broken down. It is not yet clear whether this is a passing phase, a fashion, to be replaced by a new consensus, or whether this relativity will come to dominate the history of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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33 Giovanni Levy, "On Micro history", in Burke (ed.), *New perspectives*, p. 75.