

South African Social History and the New Non-Fiction

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Americans examining the South African upheaval of 1976 to 1994 are often prone to read that period of dramatic change as the analogue of the Civil Rights Movement. There may perhaps be some justification for making that comparison a basis for historical sociology, but it is a very bad guide to understanding the thinking of the South African activists of that time. For, outside of a relatively small number of liberal activists, and a handful of religious leaders, Marxism—in a number of varieties—was, by far, the dominant set of ideas amongst militant anti-apartheid activists. The people who made the political running in those days did not believe they were participating in the March on Selma, but rather that they were involved in the analogue of, variously, the Russian, Cuban, Vietnamese or Nicaraguan revolutions. They may well have been deluded in this regard, but this was how they thought. In the 1980s, as Marxist politics crumbled elsewhere, it was very vigorous in South Africa. And this was also true of the oppositional political culture on South Africa's campuses.

Thus when Hedley Twidle, in his article in this issue of *Safundi* seeks—correctly I think—to connect the present vigor of South African non-fiction writing to the social history movement that flourished in South African academia in the 1980s, it is important to understand that intellectual development occurred as part of a political culture with a quite distinctive, leftist coloring. I want to suggest in this essay that although Twidle's contention is sound, understanding where South African non-fiction is coming from and where it is going to requires a more exact political genealogy of South African social history than he offers. I will argue that the South African social history movement was a very distinct current of Marxist-derived intellectual endeavor, but one which did not share many of the triumphalist, teleological and determinist characteristics of other forms of Marxism. Indeed, whether it remained “Marxist” in any narrow sense in the course of its evolution may well be a moot point. And whereas another contributor in this edition, Rob Nixon,

tends to absorb social history into the broader leftist culture, I will suggest that it was exactly where social history departed from other forms of Marxism that it proved most productive, and that it was these departures that made it available for its present productive engagement by non-fiction writers.

Twidle's central claim is that while under apartheid, literary fiction "provided the most acclaimed versions...of...South African society," after the transition to democracy "the most significant literary production...shifted decisively into the realms of non-fiction." I am a social historian and no literary critic, and while Twidle's argument immediately seems persuasive to me, I would normally leave such a debate to him and his colleagues. But Twidle makes a strong assertion of the importance of the historical writing of the previous decades on the formation of this powerful new non-fiction, and my attention was particularly caught by Twidle's view that the type of social history "that emerged in the 1980s (much of it associated with the History Workshop of the University of the Witwatersrand)...underwrites the kind of non-fiction now achieving prominence." I attended my first History Workshop event at Wits University in 1984, and, for nearly twenty-five years, have been a member of the committee of that organization, so that gives me a personal stake in this argument.

In the course of the debate on Twidle's article, a somewhat sharper edge has been added to the discussion by Rob Nixon's not unfavorable citation of Andile Mngxitama's recent article, in which Mngxitama accuses the History Workshop of, among other things, "antiblack racism." There is a striking divergence between Mngxitama's totally negative view of the cultural contribution of these historians and the more positive one of Twidle. Nixon, having introduced Mngxitama into the fray, occupies a somewhat intermediate position, reluctant to give the social historians full marks for political etiquette, but not quite wanting to go along all the way with Mngxitama's trashing of them either. But it is precisely the over-the-top nature of Mngxitama's assault on historians that makes his position such a dramatic counterpoint to Twidle's. Was South African social history full of productive potential or was it, as Mngxitama would have it, characterized by arrogance and part of a "white-knowledge making industry?" What I am going to suggest in this response is that, as literary scholars, Twidle, Nixon, and Stephen Clingman, another contributor to this discussion, do not fully appreciate the nuances of work by the historians they invoke, and that nor do they fully account for its political contexts. And as an activist, Mngxitama subordinates any real interest he may have in the actual work of social historians to the imperatives of his political claim-making. In the end, I believe that Twidle's argument is persuasive, but I will suggest that a more detailed exploration of the intellectual territory of historiography would actually strengthen his thesis. And strangely, not one of these authors mentions the new and major political threat that confronts South African non-fiction writing, an issue to which I will return at the end of the article.

Nixon has a distinct approach to the way in which social history features in recent South African intellectual life, which is based on a slight reframing of Twidle's less detailed account. Nixon sees the Wits History Workshop as the "epicenter" of an

influential “history from below” movement. For Nixon, Twidle’s great insight is that “History Workshop-era monographs can be seen as progenitors of much of the non-fiction that became resurgent in the 1990s, as the ambitions associated with history from below informed literary narratives about marginalized subcultures and ethnicities.” In what Twidle calls a “generic migration,” Nixon asserts, “a certain set of social and narrative ambitions have migrated out of academe into a more public genre.” To this, Nixon adds that South African campuses have, since the 1980s, witnessed the “declining aura of history as a discipline,” compared with the cachet it had earlier. According to Nixon, “History—especially a mixture of African, economic and Marxist history, was a master narrative; to study history was to unpick the locks, not just of the past, but of South Africa’s revolutionary future as well.” By contrast, in the 1990s, “with communism’s international collapse and South Africa’s turn toward compromised, non-revolutionary democracy, Marxist readings of the past lost much of their saliency. . . The grand narratives advanced by radical history had shattered into smaller narratives that non-fiction writers took up with gusto.”

The problem with Nixon’s analysis is that he conflates several different strands of political culture and intellectual activity, which it is crucially important to disaggregate. In this essay, I want to offer what I think is a more precise account of the political genealogy of South African social history, and of its links to current non-fiction.

There were several different brands of academic leftism in South Africa during the 1980s period. Firstly, there was the “official” Marxism of the ANC and the South African Communist Party, which had a clear if subterranean influence in some quarters of the academy. This was founded, on the one hand, on a series of ludicrously triumphalist histories of the ANC/SACP by such exiles as Francis Meli, and on the other, by a series of debates of stupefying obscurity on the theory of the National Democratic Revolution, an idea which reflected the contortions of the SACP in trying to reconcile Marxism and nationalism. Secondly, there was a thread that drew heavily on the ideas of the French structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser. These two categories overlapped to some extent, in, for example, the widely influential Althusserian work of the Communist theoretician Harold Wolpe, and in the so-called Sussex school, a group of South African scholars in the UK who embarked on the somewhat esoteric project of reading South African history through the “class fractions” analysis of Althusser’s disciple, Nicos Poulantzas. Much of the campus Marxism of the period, and indeed some of the history writing of the period, was informed by these ideas.

I would contend that neither of these strands of thought have had any productive impact on current South African non-fiction. The writing of SACP activists was almost universally bogged down in the leaden thought and First World War military metaphors of Stalinism. There were few real, live people in their stories, just “forces” and “cadres” who were ever “advancing” or “in the trenches” or “opening a new front.” This kind of writing was not going to produce anything of any great historical or literary interest. The National Democratic Revolution, incidentally, still has a life as an ANC phrase rationalizing anything the party needs to do politically (that is, this

week), but it has never really generated any ideas with interesting literary potential. The Poulantzians produced an excruciatingly tortured prose that seemed to be based on the assumption that a statement had to be more profound if it read like a bad translation from the French. Their accounts of the gyrations of “class fractions” now seem extraordinarily dated and, in some cases, absurd. Rob Davies, currently Minister of Trade and Industry, wrote an entire book devoted to the bizarre exercise of proving that, in terms of Poulantzian categories, white South African workers were not actually workers at all.¹ (This skill in re-defining who qualifies as a worker may well come in handy in Davies’ current job, given the state’s complete inability to generate employment). To be fair, the Poulantzians did produce one fine volume, Dan O’Meara’s *Forty Lost Years*, which is one of the best works on Afrikaner nationalism, but to some extent this marks the triumph of O’Meara’s fine research and writing abilities over his previous formation.²

It is, consequently, important not to conflate 1970s/1980s South African Marxism as a whole with social history, which is a third, quite distinct trend. Social history represented a much more limited sub-set of work within a broadly Marxist milieu. It is in this more limited category of social history that the connections to the current developments in South African writing can be found. I would argue that this development needs to be understood in an international context, and broadly as part of the anti-Stalinist New Left. In my view, this is crucial to what has been productive in the legacy of the social history movement. The initial energy for the new South African social history was created by the influence of the social history movement in the UK, and to a lesser extent in the US. Above all, the central reference point was the work of E.P. Thompson, with its emphasis on the understanding of experience and cultural formation and its critique of economic reductionism. Exposure by South African graduate students to the British History Workshops around Raphael Samuel was particularly important in spreading these ideas. There was also a degree of influence from American social historians, notably Herbert Gutman, Eugene Genovese, and the journal *Radical History Review*. In the current indigenist intellectual atmosphere in South Africa, pointing out this external origin may not go down well. But South Africa was hardly unique in this respect. For example, as Sumit Sarkar’s work suggests, for all the radical innovations of the subaltern studies school, it actually emerged from a milieu of Indian social history in which Thompsonian ideas were influential.³ A somewhat Thompsonian style of social history continues to be practiced by Indian scholars like Sarkar, to great effect. Only mindless nationalism would dismiss the value of an idea on account of its perceived foreignness.

The link to Thompsonian social history is important because it complicates considerably Nixon’s characterization of the left historians as investing in a master narrative. Thompson’s ambition was, in a phrase much-quoted by his disciples in

¹ Robert H. Davies, *Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa 1900–1960*.

² Dan O’Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party 1948–1994*.

³ Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*.

South Africa and elsewhere, to “rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the obsolete hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan and even the deluded followers of Joanna Southcott from the enormous condescension of posterity.”⁴ In other words, Thompson insisted that the lives of those who were working in trades that were wiped out by economic development, the cranky political dreams of ordinary folk, and even the visions of apparently demented self-proclaimed prophetesses, demanded and deserved our serious attention. He was not just criticizing “bourgeois” historians in doing this, but also the obsession of the left with historical “victories” and “progress.” In this respect it is important to understand Thompson’s historical background. He came out of the British Communist Party Historians’ Group of the post-World War II years that included some of the most important social historians of the century (Rodney Hilton, V.G. Kiernan, Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm). In 1956, Thompson was amongst the leaders of those who broke away from the CPGB, in protest over the party’s support for the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and set about forming a New Left. I think it is true to say that part of the spirit of this moment was a questioning of the modernist brutalism of mainstream communist thought, in favor of a gentler vision of class and community. Thompson was, after all, the biographer of William Morris, whose favorite slogan was “Fellowship is Life.” Those South African leftists who identified with social history were likely to share Thompson’s hostility to the Soviet tanks in Budapest, and to feel unwilling to join the SACP in its enthusiasm for the later deployments of Russian armor in support of authoritarians in Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia and Afghanistan.

This is significant for understanding the social history movement in South Africa because much of its work became focused on precisely those people who did not fit into the dominant political narrative of the ineluctable rise of apartheid, and the inevitable eventual triumph of the ANC, the SACP, and socialism. If we consider major works of South African social history published between the beginning of the 1980s and the mid-1990s, they tend, contrary to what Nixon’s argument implies, to follow the careers that would have been hard to incorporate into over-confident national political narratives. This is even true of the work of a figure like Jeff Peires, who actually became an ANC MP: his greatest work is about a prophetess at the center of the partly self-inflicted social catastrophe of the Xhosa cattle killing. It is hardly a story in the ANC’s preferred onward-and-upward mode. Similarly, Charles van Onselen’s major work, *The Seed is Mine*, is about a black sharecropper who had little interest in formal politics and devoted his life to the battle to survive as a small agriculturalist in a hostile environment. Tim Couzens wrote the stories of H.I.E. Dhlomo, a great but obscure, somewhat ethnicist, Zulu writer, and of a British-born Johannesburg tramp, Aloysius Horn, whose reminiscences inadvertently became the subject of a bestselling series of books. Bill Nasson told the stories of the thousands of Black men who fought, many of them with great enthusiasm, for the British in the Boer War, a topic that is retrospectively quite embarrassing to the ANC. In the accounts of the relationships between pre-colonial African societies, missionaries,

⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

and administrators given by Peter Delius and Jeff Guy, we encounter personalized and complex stories of conflict, but also of mutual influence and crossings-over. While these social historians were broadly leftist, they were all independent political thinkers, and in the exceptional case of Van Onselen, his skepticism toward all forms of nationalism led to an early and profound hostility to the ANC. The best social historians were not telling stories framed within the dominant oppositional grand political narrative of domination and resistance. They were not working within a framework that was going to be destabilized by the collapse of the Soviet Union, or the disappointments of post-apartheid South Africa. And it was precisely this that would make their work portable to post-apartheid literature. The “smaller narratives” were already there in the historical literature.

It is perhaps worth noting that recent non-fiction writers were not the first to pick up the literary potential of the South African social history. In the 1980s Malcolm Purkey, Pippa Stein, and others associated with Johannesburg’s Junction Avenue Theatre Company, mounted a dramatization of “Randlords and Rotgut,” Van Onselen’s account of the 19th century booze trade, and a production on 1930s Afrikaner women garment workers, which drew on the research of Leslie Witz and Elsabe Brink. They also staged the Market Theatre’s production *Sophiatown*, around the story of the 1950s forced removal, drawing on the work of scholars including Tom Lodge, which became a global anti-apartheid hit.

The British social history influence was also important because it resisted the linguistic obscurity that came with the waves of French, German and North American theory that rolled in from the 1970s. Thompson famously attacked Poulantzas in a vicious polemic,⁵ and the academic world of the time was much divided between Thompsonian “humanism” and the claims of his enemies to theoretical rigor. It is now easy to see that the conflict was over-polarized, with Thompson perhaps too uncritical of a kind of English common-sense and his opponents overly precious. And Thompson’s anti-theoreticist influence may have had a negative later impact on South African historians in the 1980s, by making them reluctant to engage with the cultural and linguistic turns in international scholarship. But the South African social historians did stick with the Thompson option, and this had an effect on how they wrote. By and large, the idea was to communicate in a jargon-free style, accessible to a non-specialist reader. Again, this tended to produce prose that could survive short-term changes of intellectual fashion, and, I would suggest, made for the ease of its present junction with popular non-fiction.

Twidle might have strengthened his case through more detailed attention to the manner in which social history figures in the new non-fiction. In some cases, this is not just a matter of “genre migration,” but actually of direct connection. Consider the work of Jonny Steinberg, probably the most distinguished of the authors whose work Twidle discusses. Steinberg was a student at Wits at the time when social history was at its most influential. In his brilliant *The Number*, Steinberg traces the origins of the world of the prison gangs in which his protagonist, Cape Flats gangster Magadien

⁵ E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*.

Wentzel, operates, back to the late nineteenth-century gang leader, Nongoloza Mathebula. Steinberg acknowledges his source explicitly: “I recount the story as told by the historian Charles van Onselen, who gathered the scant evidence of his real existence into a slim biography—*The Small Matter of a Horse*. Were it not for Van Onselen, we would know next to nothing about him.”⁶ In his subsequent discussion of Nongoloza’s life, Steinberg also draws on master social historian Eric Hobsbawm’s idea of the social bandit.⁷ And in the extensive notes to his more recent book on AIDS, *Three-Letter Plague*, Steinberg acknowledges drawing on the work of Wits social historians Clive Glaser and Peter Delius on sexuality, as well as other scholars working in a broadly social history mode, including Deborah Posel, Helen Bradford and William Beinart.⁸ My point is not of course simply to claim Steinberg for social history. In my view, no one who reads his volumes can be in doubt that they are in the presence of a researcher and writer of profound originality, perhaps even genius, whose work far exceeds anything he may have drawn from his various sources. But it is clear that social history had a very direct role in Steinberg’s formation. Not all the writers under discussion have anything like such a direct link to history writing, but some clearly do.

The way that Steinberg draws on social history does however suggest some of the untapped potential for authors, whether in fiction or non-fiction, in utilizing the conceptual richness of this writing. For me, one of the most suggestive aspects of Van Onselen’s work, for example, is the way in which he analyses the phenomenon of paternalism. Picking up on Genovese’s treatment of the question in his classic work on the American South, Van Onselen shows how, in the rural Transvaal of the period up to the 1940s, relations between black and white combined intimacy with class subordination. I find it odd that this aspect of his work, which is infinitely suggestive, has been so neglected. Similarly, the analysis of generational change in urban life on the Rand across the twentieth century developed by Phil Bonner, Noor Nieftagodien, Clive Glaser and others, has immense potential to inform understandings of urban life. They tease out how successive township generations experienced the world differently and the crucial social and political effects of these differences.

Perhaps the greatest conceptual contribution of social history, however, is to challenge the way in which the artificial reality that apartheid sought to impose has become a template for reading both the South African present and the South African past. Between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s, apartheid did achieve something approaching the total racial separation that Verwoerd and his cohorts desired. But there is a strong tendency to assume that this particular moment was the normal condition of South Africa. In fact it was only constructed through immense bureaucratic labor and coercion, and it proved very fragile. By the late 1970s, the

⁶ Jonny Steinberg, *The Number: One Man’s Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs*. Steinberg refers to Charles van Onselen, *The Small Matter of a Horse: The Life of ‘Nongoloza’ Mathebula 1867–1948*.

⁷ Steinberg, *The Number*, 42. Steinberg refers to Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*.

⁸ Jonny Steinberg, *Three Letter Plague: A Young Man’s Journey Through a Great Epidemic*.

boundaries it had established were already beginning to blur, with the decline of residential segregation in Johannesburg's inner city and elsewhere.

Undoubtedly, South African history is full of racism and coercion, but the idea that South Africa between the mid-seventeenth century and mid-twentieth century was simply apartheid in embryo is misguided. What social history enables us to see, if we care to look, is that apartheid was an artifact imposed on a much more complex previous reality. Social history helps us to understand that there is more to the past than apartheid-type polarities. Thus Nicole Ulrich's recent work shows us a slavery-era Cape in which slaves, a white underclass, and visiting sailors occupied a common space, distinct from that of the slave owners. Martin Legassick's work on the frontier reveals a world in which Afrikaners represented just one group of mobile pastoralists, and groups like the Griqua stood for complex, hybrid identities. Colonial conquest was a grim reality, but it did not take place upon retrospectively predictable lines. The trekker republics in the north were organizationally quite feeble, and coexisted with strong African states until British imperial military power intervened. Even the British had to rely on loyalist African allies to accomplish their military objectives: Fingos on the eastern frontier, Swazis against the Pedi, black loyalists in the South African War. Hilary Sapire's work has shown that British identifications in the black elite remained strong until as late as 1947. Studies by Van Onselen, Eddie Koch, Linda Chisholm and others showed that Johannesburg right through to the 1930s (and in some places beyond that) was characterized by inter-racial slums. Much of the energy of Afrikaner nationalism in the first part of the twentieth century came from a desperate attempt to separate out the Afrikaans-speaking working class from black people and "save" them from the influence of British and Jewish trade unionists. Some urban cultures, like that of District Six and Sophiatown, remained racially mixed until their destruction. I don't think that to say any of this is to engage in a romanticization that denies the existence of popular racism and pervasive violence. Rather, I want to say that reading apartheid back into South African history is a profoundly over-simplifying exercise.

It seems to me that Twidle ventures toward recognizing this more complex version of the past, but that his idea of a "limit" and indeed Leon de Kock's of a "seam," as key metaphors for understanding South Africa do not quite capture what the social history perspective has to offer. I think Stephen Clingman pushes in the right direction when he writes in terms of a boundary/space, but I find that still too restrictive. Even his formulation still does not quite name the entwined nature of South African lives, which manifests itself even in the midst of intense conflicts. It seems to me that the literary critic who does really get what is at stake here is Sarah Nuttall, in her notion of entanglement. In my reading she does not share a common frame with the other writers in this debate, but breaks from them quite radically. Most postcolonial criticism, despite its protestations, does not, in the end, move beyond the nationalist binary of oppression and resistance. Nuttall is one of the very few thinkers on the left who really does let go of this comforting standard narrative. The idea of entanglement aligns with the insight of social historians that the cleavages and connections in South African society need to be read in their specificity and in

their time, and not, when dealing with the past, as part of a process inevitably leading to apartheid, or when dealing with the present, as an inevitable continuation of an unchanged Verwoerdian order.

This brings me to the Johannesburg History Workshop specifically. Nixon goes into much more detail than Twidle about the role of the History Workshop, and I would like to respond to his comments accordingly. If it is important to understand that social history was a sub-set of South African Marxism, it is equally important to understand that the History Workshop was just a part of a much broader South African social history movement, and indeed only one part of left academic culture within Wits University. Nixon, I think, tends to move back and forwards between social history in general and the Wits workshop, which had and has some specific characteristics.

It is an odd sensation to have been part of something that is now discussed as a historical phenomenon. The gap between language and event is never as apparent as when one was present in a past now under scrutiny. You simply don't recognize yourself in what is being said. Some of the allusions to the History Workshop seem to suggest some massed phalanx of historians marching in lockstep. In fact the History Workshop was always just a small committee of individuals, with very differing scholarly approaches, interests, and political ideas. Its cohesion was largely the work of three extraordinarily energetic and talented leaders, Belinda Bozzoli in the 1980s, Phil Bonner in the subsequent two decades, and, more recently, Noor Nieftagodien. Its members were drawn from small numbers of interested individuals in Wits social sciences, history, education and literature departments, and one or two outsiders. It is also the case that some of the people most identified with the History Workshop in outside understandings of it, actually had somewhat tangential relationships with it organizationally. Tim Couzens and Charles van Onselen were very important at the beginning, but their African Studies Institute became the somewhat separate focus of their energies. What gave the History Workshop the impact that it had, was that it developed a rather different sense of its role than other social history groupings. The History Workshop was from the start aimed at combining high-quality academic research with popularization as part of an anti-apartheid political project. Thus it held a series of major academic conferences, with astutely chosen themes, which aimed to bring together the new work being done, and produced a number of notable academic volumes, which highlighted this work.⁹ But it also ran cultural festivals linked to the academic events, which, in the years up to 1990, on occasion attracted thousands of trade unionists and community activists. It published works of historical popularization, notably a series of books by Luli Callinicos, which achieved a significant readership in the labor movement. The History Workshop ran a series of articles on South African history in the United Democratic Front-aligned newspaper, *New Nation*, which proved so popular that a book of them was produced. There were

⁹For example, Belinda Bozzoli ed., *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal*; Belinda Bozzoli ed., *Class Community and Conflict*; Philip Bonner et al. eds., *Holding Their Ground*; Philip Bonner et al. eds., *Apartheid's Genesis 1935–1962* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1993).

workshops for school teachers, particularly focusing on rural areas, in which Cynthia Kros played a leading role, and this intervention in school history has gone on to the present. In the post-apartheid era the History Workshop continued to find other ways to engage with popularization in an egalitarian spirit: probably the most salient was Bonner's intellectual leadership in shaping Johannesburg's Apartheid Museum.

I am sure that all of this could have been done better and so on. I certainly don't want to present the History Workshop as some sort of paragon or as deserving of some form of special congratulations. It is no doubt as true of us as anyone else that as Hamlet says: "Use every man after his deserts, and who should 'scape whipping." But it does then seem to me that when Nixon partially seconds Andile Mngxitama's criticism of the History Workshop on the basis of his own memories of the personal comportment of white scholars in "radical history workshops" in Grahamstown, Cape Town, Johannesburg and London, he rather misses the point. Wits History Workshop was—and is—a very distinct animal; it always did a lot more than "radical seminars."

Mngxitama's comments on South African social history, cited by Nixon, come from a review of Anton Harber's book *Diepsloot*, a recently published account of the squatter camp to the north of Johannesburg. Harber was a founding editor of the famous 1980s–1990s anti-apartheid newspaper, the *Weekly Mail*, subsequently the *Mail and Guardian*, and is now Professor of Journalism at Wits University. Mngxitama makes it clear in the review that he objects fundamentally to Harber writing about black people at all. In the course of what I don't think it is unfair to describe as a tirade, Mngxitama characterizes Harber's writing in the most hostile terms and then slides into a sudden attack on the social historians:

One wonders if Harber was motivated by the impulse to civilise – that colonial desire to study and to save the native from himself.

This impulse has a strong tradition in liberal universities – once it expressed itself in the History Workshop project at the University the Witwatersrand, which proclaimed to do 'history from below'.

At their most arrogant moment, proponents of this social-history narrative even argued that they were giving voice to blacks through understanding the consciousness of these pitiful subjects of apartheid oppression. The emphasis was on 'humanising' blacks.

The antiblack racism of this 'history from below' enterprise has escaped serious questioning and one suspects the likes of Harber have not had to confront the question of how and why a white researcher would intrude into black spaces. The ethical questions related to this problematic view have never been subject to sustained critiques because of the power of white-knowledge making industries. Such a critique would force white writers into much needed self-reflection when writing about the black condition.¹⁰

¹⁰ Andile Mngxitama, "Whose Story is it Anyway?."

Nixon later joins in with a partial endorsement to tell us that “[d]oubtless at some point in the Wits history workshop’s development certain scholars claimed, as Mngxitama suggests, that through their endeavors they were channeling black consciousness.” From a scholar of Nixon’s stature one might have expected a footnote before jumping on the bandwagon. I can only say that I never ever once encountered anyone making such a bizarre claim. Then, having convicted HW on the basis of this mysterious doubtlessness, Nixon offers it as an example of our “intellectual self-importance and methodological naiveté.”

What Mngxitama offers is actually a dazzling series of non-sequiturs. As Mngxitama himself admits, he is *speculating* when he attributes colonial desire to Harber, and this speculation quickly transforms into a charge against the “tradition” of the “liberal universities.” This liberalism is in turn attributed holus-bolus to the History Workshop, despite the fact that the History Workshop was, in its early stages, centrally engaged in the critique of liberalism. It is true that the History Workshop talked much about writing history “from below,” but that phrase was in circulation internationally amongst leftist social historians and did not have the racial connotations Mngxitama implies. HW never saw itself as alternative to black organization. On the contrary, it always had supportive connections to oppositional political groups, and particularly strong ones with the FOSATU trade unions in the first half of the 1980s. (Bonner was detained without trial and threatened with deportation for his role in FOSATU). In a quarter of a century of being involved in the History Workshop activities, I encountered not a single instance of any person within the group expressing opinions which suggested that they believed that they were “civilizers,” or that black South Africans were “pitiful subjects” who needed “humanizing.” This would indeed have been anathema to the spirit of the History Workshop. And it would have been intolerable to the black members of the Workshop, whose existence Mngxitama completely effaces. He likes to think of a South Africa that functions in terms of exclusively black and white spaces: in doing so he participates in the continued imposition of apartheid binaries on an impossibly entangled country. Mngxitama goes on to say that the History Workshop’s approach escaped “serious questioning.” Again this is quite untrue. There was always continuous, sometimes exhausting, debate with outside community activists and organizations about the practice of the workshop, in which we willingly engaged. Much of this was not formally written up, but that does not mean it did not take place. And there is a very substantial body of published critique of the History Workshop by scholars at the University of the Western Cape, foremost amongst them Ciraj Rassool and Premesh Lalu.¹¹ Obviously I disagree with their views, but I deeply respect their writing, which is characterized by academic integrity and conceptual rigor. Mngxitama’s ill-informed bluster simply reflects that he has not bothered to read their work

Finally, let me say that I find the contributions to this debate oddly apolitical. They ignore the current, major onslaught by the South African state on the ability of its

¹¹ Many articles by these and other authors in the UWC journal *Kronos* address related themes.

citizens to research and write non-fiction at all. This comes in two main forms. Firstly, there is the Information Bill, at present before parliament. The aim of this legislation is to enable the state to classify broad swathes of information, including material of no conceivable security importance. Writers publishing information from classified documents could go to jail for lengthy periods, and asserting that the publication of such information is in the public interest would be no defense. Secondly, slightly over the horizon is legislation for a Media Appeals Tribunal, which would empower a state-appointed body to impose draconian punishments on writers and publishers of material it deemed objectionable. The former measure has been brilliantly contested by the “Right2Know” campaign led by human rights activist Zackie Achmat, but it seems that the state is determined to ram these odious proposals through. And it is quite possible that the impact of the bills might be to create an atmosphere of fear which will bring the whole exciting wave of non-fiction to a shuddering halt.

What is driving this process is the shift, under Jacob Zuma, to the reconstitution of the South African political economy as a full-blown kleptocracy. Under Nelson Mandela, there was a genuine effort by the state to pursue a utopian non-racialism. Under Thabo Mbeki, despite that leader’s authoritarianism and his radically misguided policies on AIDS and on Zimbabwe, there was a real project of building a modernist state. Zuma on the other hand has only two policies: to keep the utterly divergent factions of the ANC together, and to cultivate his own business interests and the vertical patronage networks on which they are based. Julius Malema’s challenge to Zuma can be understood as being largely about using the discontent of the marginalized to promote a rival set of business connections and patronage links. With the honorable exception of Zwelinzima Vavi’s COSATU trade union federation, the politics of every faction in the ANC has become what Jean-Francois Bayart calls “the politics of the belly.”¹²

The chief obstacle to accumulation through the state has been the vibrancy and freedom of South African civil society, including its writers. The problem for those enriching themselves by illicit means, is that writers keep writing about them, and some culprits even get prosecuted. Zuma and his cohorts are determined to fix this problem. By controlling the supply of information, they are opening the way to an era of unchecked looting. And the courts need to be attended to as well. South Africa’s Constitutional Court has been one of the great successes of the post-apartheid era, not only upholding civil rights in an exemplary fashion, but boldly pushing the state to attend to the material needs of the poor. The Information and Media Appeals legislation is likely to be appealed there.

But a solution is at hand. Zuma has just appointed a new Chief Justice, over the heads of a distinguished array of candidates, including the vastly respected Deputy Chief Justice, Dikgang Moseneke. The head of the South African judiciary is now one Mogoeng Mogoeng. Mogoeng has no track record either as an academic lawyer or as a writer of distinguished judgments. He has consistently passed lenient sentences on

¹² Jean-Francois Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*.

child rapists and gender abusers. (In one spectacular case he gave a non-custodial sentence to a man who had dragged his girlfriend behind his car because, he thought, she had not suffered much injury). Mogoeng is a fundamentalist Christian and—this should wake up American readers—professes his admiration for the legal practices of the State of Arizona (which currently includes treatment of illegal immigrants reminiscent of the pass laws).¹³ It seems as if the President has found the best man for the job he wants—shutting up those who want to comment on the emperor’s sartorial style.

In the end then, the real or imagined deficiencies of social historians may not be the most immediately pressing concern for the future of South African literature. Because if we do not pay attention to the direction of the South African state in its attempts to control *all* production of knowledge, there may quite soon be very little South African non-fiction for future literary scholars to debate.

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¹³ See the coverage of Chief Justice Mogoeng’s appointment in the *Mail and Guardian* newspaper.