

Narratives of progress: Zimbabwean historiography and the end of history

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The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living (Karl Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*).

This brief commentary takes its inspiration from the opening address delivered by John Hoffman, and printed in these pages; that is, progress is usefully understood as a contradictory, contested and ambiguous process. But rather than attempt a comprehensive survey of the past 40 or so years of academic analyses of Zimbabwe's pasts, what follows has as its focus the emergence of 'patriotic history' and particularly its nationalist antecedents. These are critically examined. Although not concerned with the generality of recent studies that are neither nationalist nor materialist in orientation, this paper sketches in outline the rise, fall and rise of radical accounts. It ends by suggesting how such analyses might be taken forward.

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Patriotic history

According to Melber (2011, 89), the seizure of power by Southern Africa's national liberation movements 'signals in their understanding something similar to what Francis Fukuyama dubbed as the end of history'. From this perspective, national liberation is a just and historically necessary conclusion to the struggle between 'the' people and the forces of racism and colonialism. From this, two conclusions follow: the region's national liberation movements are progressive, and their coming to power marks the end of a process. For them to be overthrown would constitute a counter-revolutionary victory for reactionary forces.¹ These are the assumptions underpinning 'patriotic history', even if the precise moment of its articulation has turned on the intensification of particular political struggles.

In the Zimbabwean case, this is an interpretation framed by many of Robert Mugabe's more recent speeches and pronouncements (Mugabe 2001). As understood by Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the defining characteristics of 'patriotic history' are the central roles ascribed to land and race, circumscribed by loyalty to the liberation movement in the shape of ZANLA/ZANU. A further dimension has been the affirmation of Zimbabwe's sovereignty against external interference, especially where

the latter has taken the form of selective Western support for human rights.² For Blessing-Miles Tendi (2010a, 4), the essence of ‘patriotic history’ boils down to ‘ZANU-PF as the alpha and omega of Zimbabwe’s past, present and future’. To all intents and purposes, Zimbabwean history is reduced to a succession of *chimurengas*—never, it might be noted in passing, *umvukelas*—in which the present ruling dispensation is the only legitimate heir to the Nehanda and Kaguvi spirit mediums (Tendi 2010a, see also Tendi 2008, Tendi 2010b).

That this celebration of a violent past is narrowly self-serving has been easy enough to expose, and several important books and articles have done just that (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009, 234–98 and Tendi 2010b, see also Kriger 2006). But if indeed this particular political project by ZANU-PF does seek to mark the ‘end of history’, then the historiographical roots of the turn to ‘patriotic history’ merit closer scrutiny than they have so far received. Those who now piously enjoin us to distinguish between nationalist historians (‘bad’) and historians of nationalism (‘good’), are themselves guilty of special pleading (Ranger 2004, 2005). They pass too lightly over political and intellectual sympathies manifest in the 1960s and 1970s and which endured until very recently. Although the behaviour of the child long since grown to adulthood is now an embarrassment to be shunned, the long-term responsibility of the parent should be acknowledged, particularly when parent and offspring have so much in common. These include the flattening of difference; the privileging of certain voices over others; and the identification of hegemonic nationalism as the bearer of improvement and progress.

Nationalist history: from voices to silence

Nowhere in Zimbabwean historiography is this tendency better exemplified than in the work of Terence Ranger. Some early studies aside (Ranger 1964, 1967a), his books and articles have exercised a generally pernicious nationalist influence for over a generation. From the fanciful extrapolations and factual misrepresentations in *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* (Ranger 1967b); through the gloss applied in *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War* (Ranger 1985), to the vicious excesses of the second chimurenga waged by ZANLA; by way of the tin ear first displayed in *The African Voice* (Ranger 1970) and again evidenced by *Voices from the Rocks* (Ranger 1999); to the celebration of the silence of the grave in ‘Matabeleland Today’ (Ranger 1989),³ these invariably provided usable pasts for an authoritarian nationalism under construction from the mid-1950s onwards.⁴ While each of these examples could be examined at length, constraints of time oblige this paper to look briefly at only two particular cases.

Ranger’s *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* (1967b) is the foundation on which much nationalist and ‘patriotic’ historiography rests. Yet for all that this book was much praised at the time, research conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s demonstrated beyond doubt that *Revolt* had got it spectacularly wrong in every important respect, even to the extent of misquoting crucial documents. Its crude nationalist underpinnings were first exposed by Julian Cobbing’s scholarly account of the Ndebele Rising. The Ndebele *umvukela*, Cobbing concluded, did not witness ‘the emergence of a leadership which was charismatic and revolutionary’, as Ranger claimed. As the Ndebele had not been divorced from their ‘traditional’ leadership by the mid-1890s, the leading role ascribed by Ranger to religious leaders was quite simply wrong. They

certainly did not co-ordinate a united Ndebele-Shona resistance against the whites. Nothing like the ‘first act of “Zimbabwean” nationalism’, the Ndebele Rising was rather ‘the last act of the independent Ndebele state’ (Cobbing 1977, 18 and Cobbing 1976).

If Cobbing’s demolition of Ranger’s explanation of the Ndebele Rising was not enough, it very soon became apparent that *Revolt’s* chapters on the Shona rising were equally unreliable. In a series of closely argued articles and essay reviews, David Beach subjected Ranger’s work to forensic scrutiny. The results demonstrated that Ranger’s findings were unedifying, to say the least. Acknowledging that no assessment of *Revolt* could be complete ‘without some reference to the political context in which it was written’, Beach explained to his readers that at a time when the settler counter-revolution of UDI appeared to be going from strength to strength in the face of African disunity, Ranger’s interpretation of the Risings seemingly offered hope for the future. With past divisions overcome under their new religious leadership, in Ranger’s version the Ndebele and the Shona ‘achieved almost complete tactical surprise, with a preconcerted, coordinated, almost simultaneous rising in each zone in March and June 1896’. In short, wrote Beach, ‘*Revolt* served as a “charter for Zimbabwe as a focus for present-day political action”’. But in serving the interests of 1960s nationalism, it certainly wasn’t good history. For Beach, Ranger’s book turned far too much on inference, analogy and assertion, and too little on what the documents actually said. Contrary evidence had sometimes been omitted. On Beach’s meticulous reading of every available file, there was nothing about the Shona rising, or risings, as he preferred to see them, to support Ranger’s usable past. In neither Mashonaland nor Matabeleland had events come anywhere near to approximating ‘the Rangerian model of a tightly-knit Ndebele-Shona religious high command organizing a pre-planned, simultaneous rising’ (Beach 1979, 20 and Beach 1980).⁵ But precisely because it purported to reveal a history of united struggle against settler colonialism, a past shorn of ambiguity and complexity, *Revolt* was perfectly attuned to the needs of the new Jacobins.

Given that this article was conceived for a conference in Bulawayo, it is fitting that the focus of the second case study should be Matabeleland.⁶ Published in 1989, Ranger’s article purported to describe the situation in the west of the country in the second half of the decade (Ranger 1989, 161–2 and 172).⁷ Without once mentioning the murderous activities of the Fifth Brigade, his egregious account of Matabeleland instead emphasised Mugabe’s generosity and courage. Although the author professed to be ‘in no doubt about the scale of... the brutalities of 1983 and 1985’, he wrote as if the ‘balance of terror’ was weighted most heavily on the side of the dissidents. Underpinned by the belief that there was ‘almost no suspicion of me as a historian sympathetic to ZANU/PP’, and seemingly oblivious to the possibility that informants located with the help of ‘a guide provided for me by the District Administrator’ might not be entirely forthcoming about state-sponsored mass violence in the very recent past, Ranger’s article noted that there had been ‘too many collapses of discipline, too many rapes, too many killings’, but only on the part of dissidents. Beneficiaries of Mugabe’s offer of an amnesty, the people of Matabeleland South’s Matobo district had apparently, of their own accord, reached a general opinion: ‘a condemnation of dissident violence’ (Beach 1979, 20, 1980, 1986, Ch 5; Tsomondo 1977). That this prudent expression of opinion might have been influenced by popular memory of Bhalagwe Camp, the huge detention centre in the south of the district where

thousands of villagers were detained and tortured by the Fifth Brigade (The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe 2007, 223–31), was nowhere considered in this myopic view of Matabeleland's recent past.

Alternative histories: radical history

For all that 'patriotic history' and its nationalist antecedents were so manifestly wanting, alternative accounts, some initial successes notwithstanding, ultimately found it difficult to establish themselves within and without Zimbabwe. To begin with, it is not as if radical scholars were particularly slow off the mark after 1980. Despite the widespread tendency at Independence and afterwards, noted by Hoffman in his opening conference address, to see ZANU-PF as the embodiment of progressive politics, a number of notably critical voices were raised early on. Both Saul (1980) and Astrow (1983), for example, anticipated ZANU-PF's 'betrayal' of the revolutionary possibilities of the overthrow of colonialism, as did David Moore's close inspection of liberation struggle ideologies (1988, 1991). Over the course of that first decade, others followed suit, particularly Lionel Cliffe and Colin Stoneman, and the various contributors to the two volumes edited by the latter (Stoneman 1981, 1988; Stoneman and Cliffe 1989). Notable contributions by Zimbabwean scholars in much the same period were brought together in *Zimbabwe. The Political Economy of Transition, 1980–1986* (Mandaza 1986). Edited by Ibbo Mandaza, its examination of the pattern of events since Independence was framed by an opening chapter by Mandaza himself. As the Second Chimurenga never 'encompassed within it even the idea of a socialist revolution', the postcolonial state was 'an apparent mediator between capital and labour...inclined towards controlling...popular demands' (Mandaza 1986).

Where scepticism was voiced about the so-called 'national democratic stage' of the revolution during the 1980s, however, it tended to bemoan the entrenchment of capitalism rather than lament the absence of democracy. Criticism was doubtless also muted by a reluctance to attack Zimbabwe's new rulers in a period of intensifying anti-apartheid struggle, but more damaging to the hard won 1970s gains of political economy (Phimister 1979) were the conservative consequences of the emergence of postmodernism and postcolonial studies in the northern hemisphere. While these latter developments questioned all grand narratives, subsequent intellectual convulsions affected radical analyses more than most, at least for a time, especially in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and so-called 'actually existing socialism'.

But although more and more historiographical space was occupied by nationalism's praise singers,⁸ it was never uncontested. Norma Kriger (1992) and Steven Robins (1996) exposed the glaring weaknesses of what the latter termed nationalism's 'praise texts'. Inside the country itself, the Economic History Department of the University of Zimbabwe, and latterly the Institute of Development Studies of the same institution, as well as a handful of individuals in other Departments and independent organisations, found continuing inspiration from historical materialism broadly conceived. To take the most prominent example, one of the first studies to explore the contextual limitations of democracy as practised by the region's militarist liberation movements was another collection of essays edited by Mandaza, this time together with Lloyd Sachikonye (1991).

Labour history remained a key bastion of radical analysis. Research in this field by Brian Raftopoulos in particular (Raftopoulos 1995b; Raftopoulos and Phimister 1997; Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni 1999; Raftopoulos and Phimister 2000; Raftopoulos and Sachikonye 2001),⁹ served as a springboard for what was to become over the course of the 1990s and beyond, a series of wide-ranging and thorough-going critiques of authoritarian nationalism (Raftopoulos 2003; Raftopoulos and Savage 2005). Infused with political and intellectual urgency, these interventions were themselves hotly debated as academics on the Left struggled to understand the dynamics driving the post-2000 crisis in terms of rights versus redistribution (Yeros 2002; Moore 2004; Raftopoulos 2006; Moyo and Yeros 2007),¹⁰ a dispute which lost momentum once they were acknowledged as not necessarily mutually exclusive. They were anyway revised and taken up by a younger generation of scholars guided by Raftopoulos and Alois Mlambo, and published in 2009 as *Becoming Zimbabwe* (Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2009).

Conclusion: becoming history

This tightly edited and well-received collection marked not only a significant resurgence of radical scholarship, but also nicely exemplifies Hoffman's insistence that notions of progress are most usefully understood as complex and contested processes. More than this, it may also be that such processes are best approached through the interplay of local, national, regional and international contexts. In this way, for example, what Raftopoulos has memorably termed the 'discourse and destructive party accumulation project of ZANU-PF' (Raftopoulos 2010) would resonate beyond the region if located within the wider regimes of accumulation by dispossession identified by David Harvey (2003) as cited in Callincos 2009, 14). It is a point that was developed with particular force by John Saul when commenting on Hoffman's paper. Notions of progress, insisted Saul, are essentially political, not philosophical questions. The best studies of Zimbabwe's pasts have always understood this, foregrounding relations of power and exploitation, even as they placed them in historical context. With fluffy social histories entirely devoid of any understanding of political economy continuing to appear (Ranger 2010), only a renewed emphasis on contradictions and classes is likely to produce accounts of the past free of the nightmares of the present.

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Notes

1. For further discussion, see variously, Good (2002), Melber (2003) and Southall (2003).
2. The outstanding study in this regard is S. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Do 'Zimbabweans' Exist? Trajectories of Nationalism, National Identity Formation and Crisis in a Postcolonial State* (Bern 2009).
3. For pointed criticisms of these books and articles, see amongst others, Beach (1979), Cobbing (1977), Cross (1972), Kriger (1992), Robins (1996) and Phimister (2003).

4. See especially Raftopoulos (1995), and Scarnecchia (2008). For a notably prescient analysis, see Slater (1975).
5. Both criticisms are discussed further in chapter five of Beach (1986). See also Tsomondo (1977, 13).
6. What follows is taken in part from Phimister (2008).
7. See also Ranger (2006), where it is claimed that 'human rights organisations did not publically condemn Zimbabwe in the 1980s'. This is contradicted by Lindgren (2005).
8. Amongst others, see Martin and Johnson (1981), Frederickse (1983), Lan (1985), Maxwell (1999), Ranger (1995, 1999).
9. Important materialist analyses written in this period on non-labour topics include Bond (1998), Bond and Manyanya (2002) and Mlambo (1997).
10. See also Moyo and Yeros (2005), Mamdani (2008), Chung (2006).

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