

Feature

In commemoration of Stanley Trapido (1933-2008)

Obituary and introduction

Stanley Trapido, who died in January 2008, had been a lecturer for 30 years in the Politics of New States, and latterly a Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford. As readers of this journal will need no reminding, he was one of the founding figures in a small but highly influential group of émigré South African intellectuals that sought refuge in England after the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. It was Trapido who helped to shape a “revisionist” school of historiography that, by foregrounding the roles of capital and class-formation in the evolution of modern South Africa, cast a bright analytical light on the ways in which capitalist development in town and countryside informed the patterns of racial domination culminating in apartheid.

Born in November 1933, Stanley Trapido was raised and schooled amidst modest circumstances in the mining town of Krugersdorp, where work underground helped to finance a first degree at the University of the Witwatersrand. From there, he went on to teach at the University of Cape Town in 1958, where his rich sociological imagination and instinctive love of the underdog was encouraged by the robust approach of the communist activist and intellectual, Jack Simons. A post followed at the University of Natal, Durban in the early 1960s, but soon afterwards he and his wife, Barbara, went into exile. By this time, Trapido was already asking searching questions about nationalism and the limitations of liberal thought and practice in a colonial setting, concerns prominently represented in his doctoral thesis submitted to the University of London in 1970. That same year, having taught for five years at the University of Durham, he was appointed in the Oxford position he was to hold until retirement in 2001.

An indefatigable researcher, and perfectionist almost to a fault, Trapido’s lucid prose punctuated a stream of articles published in leading journals on either side of the Atlantic, as well as other, widely-cited chapters in co-edited books. Amongst the most important of the latter are *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in 20th-century South Africa* (with Shula Marks), and *Putting a Plough to the Ground* (with William Beinart and Peter Delius). Refusing to fall into the trap of South African exceptionalism, Trapido was amongst the first to draw on studies of American slavery, European economic development and English working-class history to place South African industrialization

(an “alliance of gold and maize”) along with its labour-repressive institutions and distinctive social structures, into comparative perspective. The ensuing article first appeared in the *Journal of Development Studies* in 1971. It is republished here, together with an introduction by Gavin Williams.

Trapido’s research into agricultural landlords, labour tenants, peasants, sharecroppers, poachers and slaves, was equally path-breaking. His “Reflections on Land, Office and Wealth in the South African Republic”, originally part of a collection of essays, *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa*, edited by Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, is also republished here. It is introduced by Johan Bergh. Ranging far and wide across place and period, Trapido’s interests also encompassed the making and meanings of Afrikaner nationalism, colonial paternalism and other ideologies. A steady flow of papers, delivered at research seminars in London, Oxford, Johannesburg, and Cape Town, revealed deep insights into the wider nature of Dutch mercantile capitalism, as well as its regional manifestations. By placing the Cape firmly in the Atlantic world, Trapido traced with extraordinary skill the construction over time of local identities. Three of his seminar papers stand out in this particular regard, namely “The Cape Dutch and Problems of Colonial Identity”; “Van Riebeeck Day and the New Jerusalem: Identity, community and violence in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Cape”; and “The emergence of Liberalism and the making of ‘Hottentot Nationalism’, 1815-1834”. Accomplished entries on John Fairbairn, Saul Solomon, Lady Anne Barnard, and Andries Stockenström, all in the Oxford *Dictionary of National Biography*, bear further testimony to Trapido’s mastery of these issues.

Stanley Trapido’s abiding preoccupation however seems always to have been the South African War of 1899-1902, its causes and consequences. They were problems he wrestled with from the beginning to the end of his professional career. Taking as his starting point J.S. Marais’ *The Fall of Kruger’s Republic*, a book that he greatly admired, Trapido produced a succession of distinguished articles and chapters on this most recalcitrant of historical problems. With Shula Marks, he wrote what was soon recognised as being a seminal study of “Lord Milner and the South African State”, and a follow-up, “Lord Milner and the South African State reconsidered”, the former published in *History Workshop Journal* in 1979, and the latter in M. Twaddle (editor), *Imperialism, the State and the Third World*. To this end, they also contributed to the new *Dictionary of National Biography* an entry of unsurpassed breadth and depth on Cecil Rhodes. Yet for

Trapido

Trapido, a crucial figure who helped to set all turning, certainly in the years immediately before the war, was Percy Fitzpatrick. His significance initially set out in a substantial *Dictionary of National Biography* entry, Fitzpatrick was subsequently placed by Trapido at the centre of the political conjuncture that made war highly likely, if not inevitable. This interpretation was itself folded into a magisterial survey of “Imperialism, settler identities and colonial capitalism: the hundred year origins of the 1899 South African War”, written as a chapter for the forthcoming *Cambridge History of South Africa*, and published here for the first time. It is introduced by Ian Phimister.

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