

Merle Lipton is known to historians of twentieth century South Africa for her major book, *Capitalism and apartheid*, which analysed the relationship between segregation/apartheid policies and economic development. Though originally trained as a historian at the University of Cape Town, where in 1963, under the name Merle Babrow, she completed a thesis that looked critically at the work of George McCall Theal, since the early 1970s she has worked from England, mainly not as a historian, but as a researcher and consultant on current issues relating to South Africa, so keeping abreast of the way in which South Africa moved away from high apartheid to its present-day democracy.¹ Now she has produced a relatively short, but densely argued book that considers the ways in which scholars have written about the origins, development and eventual collapse of segregation/apartheid.

1. Not only is she not a professional historian, but it is perhaps significant that none of those whose help she acknowledges are professional historians either.

Her book is not confined to historiography. She proceeds to discuss key topics relating to our recent past, especially the reasons for the collapse of apartheid, without relating them directly to any historiography, and she is concerned with the writings of a large number of liberal scholars who are not historians. While I accept, at least in part, a number, though by no means all of her arguments about what has happened in recent decades, I will not be concerned with such arguments unrelated directly to historiography, and therefore not with her book as a whole, which I plan to review in general elsewhere. Instead, I focus here on what she does have to say about how South African historical writing has developed over time, noting that, as has already been mentioned, her book does not concern “South African history” as a whole, but only a key theme in it.

It is ironic that at the very end of her book, she calls for an even-handed approach that will understand and explain, rather than blame and moralize (p 173), for her book is not the kind of balanced, dispassionate, up-to-date survey that could be recommended to students or others interested in the way our historical literature has evolved over time. Such a survey is much needed, as it is now twenty years since the appearance of two such surveys, both of which are therefore dated and require major revision.² Lipton’s book, however, especially in its early chapters, is a strident and essentially ahistorical defence of what she sees as liberal history against its neo-Marxist detractors, who are – and this will surely come as a surprise to those who know our work – taken to include such historians as my UCT colleague, Nigel Worden, and myself, because of what we wrote in our surveys.³

Many of Lipton’s pages are taken up with what she claims are the misrepresentations of neo-Marxist historians. One wonders how many readers will find it worth their time trying to follow her detailed discussion of often relatively petty points about who referred to whose work (some of this is repeated in even greater detail and with even greater invective in appendices to Chapter 3).⁴ While it will be necessary for me to give some examples of how she has misrepresented my work and that of others, through often selective and misleading quotation or reference – as David Hackett Fischer pointed out long ago, by selective quoting you can seem to prove almost anything – much more importantly, in my view, in her early chapters she fails to convey a sense of how South African historical writing has developed in recent decades, perhaps because she has been remote from it. Her depiction of that development is deeply flawed. As one who has always regarded himself as a liberal historian, and who has always recognized that the greatest historical scholarship of the twentieth century came from liberal historians – did Lipton, one wonders, read what I wrote about W.M. Macmillan, C.W. de Kiewiet, and others in *The Making of the*

2. K. Smith, *The Changing Past* (Southern Book Publishers, Johannesburg, 1988); C. Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1988). I was asked to revise my book long ago, but it seemed to require such major recasting that I have yet not tackled the task.
3. Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past*; N. Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1994).
4. Some of this is also in her chapter in H.E. Stolten (ed), *History Making and Present Day Politics. The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 2007). She can of course legitimately point to apparent failures by reviewers to read *Capitalism and Apartheid* properly, but such criticisms are hardly central to a debate between liberals and neo-Marxists, and whether or not her book referred to earlier neo-Marxist writing, is hardly an important issue.

South African past, let alone my other relevant writing not mentioned in her book?⁵ I would have been delighted to read a forthright and soundly-based defence of liberal history writing. It is therefore disappointing to find that her book displays some of the very methodological faults she is so critical of in others.

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One could easily come away from Lipton's book with the impression that the debate between liberal and neo-Marxist historians has been going on since the 1970s, with relatively little change, with the old "acrimony" (her word, repeated more than once, and emphasised) still continuing (p 5). She quotes writing from the 1980s without setting it within the context in which it was written and without showing how judgments and approaches have changed since. She presents no evidence that the debate between "liberals" and "neo-Marxist" historians continues in the twenty-first century, let alone that it does so as a "bitter, polarised South African debate", with "heated, inflated rhetoric" (pp 4, 6). There has been heated debate among historians in recent years about the early nineteenth century and, say, environmental issues, but not about her major theme, the relationship of racial policy and economic growth, and the influence that business had on the undermining of apartheid. Though she does come to admit a growing convergence between the two schools, she does not spell out the nature of that convergence beyond looking in detail at the case of Dan O'Meara, who in the 1990s, she argues, moved a long way towards the liberal position without admitting it (pp 57, 187). Here, as elsewhere, she draws upon work over more than two decades, without showing how and why views changed, under very different political circumstances, and without distinguishing between sociological and historical interpretations of the past.

The very categories "liberal" and "radical" are themselves, of course, constructs that suggest a homogeneity rarely present, and they are terms that, we now realise (and I readily plead guilty), were too freely used in the 1970s and 1980s, without adequate interrogation.⁶ While she says that neo-Marxist historians self-identified themselves as belonging to a distinct school (p 6), she writes as if there was, and is, such a school of

5. This includes my *C.W. de Kiewiet* (University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1986), my chapter on liberal historiography in J. Butler, R. Elphick and D. Welsh (eds), *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa. Its History and Prospect* (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 1987) and my "A Liberal Descent? W.M. Macmillan, C.W. de Kiewiet and the History of South Africa", in S. Marks and H. Macmillan (eds), *Africa and Empire. W.M. Macmillan, Historian and Social Critic* (Temple Smith, London, 1989).

6. Lipton is critical of the way in which those she wishes to recognize as liberal historians have been recategorised as radicals (p 13, note 7), citing in particular W.M. Macmillan (consistently misspelling his surname) and Eddie Roux. While Macmillan was called a radical by Jeremy Krikler and his own son (see the relevant chapters in Marks and Macmillan, *Africa and Empire*) because he was a Fabian socialist, he remains for me the great liberal historian, even if he was radical in his politics. As for Roux, he began writing the articles that eventually formed *Time Longer than Rope* when a member of the Communist Party, and to classify him as a liberal because he was involved in the founding of the South African Liberal Party (p 13, note 6; p 189) is very misleading, especially as he was not in fact invited to join that party until 1957 – E. and W. Roux, *Rebel Pity. The Life of Eddie Roux* (Rex Collings Ltd, London, 1970), pp 171, 208.

writing, and does not show how major debates emerged between, say, the structuralists and the social historians. Having put historians into schools, she much later recognizes some of the problems of doing so (pp 135-136), writes, for example, of the “more radical Liberal Party” (p 140), and accuses others of “insistent, indeed obsessive, political categorization of scholars” (p 189). At one point she seems to recognize that I do not belong firmly to the neo-Marxist school, though she calls me its “chief praise-singer” and goes on to say that “Even Saunders … rejects this …”, as if it was not to be expected that I would ever criticise anything the revisionists said (p 20). In her early chapters, it is noticeable how often she quotes commentators on the neo-Marxists, rather than neo-Marxists themselves.

When I surveyed trends in historical scholarship over twenty years ago, writing in the mid-1980s when neo-Marxist scholarship was virtually hegemonic in South Africa, I did indeed praise some of the then recent neo-Marxist writing by historians, and if I were writing now, I would write very differently. Earlier in my survey, and in other and subsequent writing – which Lipton ignores, but must be aware of, for she published in some of the same places⁷ – I made my admiration of those usually called liberal historians clear. While she criticises me for saying that neo-Marxism had by the mid-1980s become the new orthodoxy, she does not appreciate that that was the case in South African universities at that time.⁸ While I now concede that I was too ready to embrace revisionist perspectives in the mid-1980s, she herself accepts that, for example, Martin Legassick’s famous “Frontier Tradition” paper was “suggestive” and “stimulating” (p 14).

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Why revive old polemics now and be so defensive of liberal scholarship? A possible clue lies in her appendices, where she reacts at length to reviews of *Capitalism and apartheid*, and repeats her rebuttal of the allegation that liberal scholars did not reply to the attacks on them by the neo-Marxists. She not only denies this, but claims that this was a deliberate airbrushing out of liberals, who were mostly ignored in the literature, but were denounced verbally at seminars on university campuses (p 185). Such verbal denunciation may have taken place at seminars in London – I do not recall it at historical seminars at UCT – and obviously took place in the context of the anti-apartheid struggle, at a time when to seem to defend “progressive capital” as the main force likely to undermine apartheid, was hardly likely to win one friends among those who were doing all they could to bring down the apartheid regime. If in my

7. See our chapters in J. Lonsdale (ed), *South Africa in Question* (University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 1988), or the paper I gave at the conference she attended in Denmark in 2002. She lists papers given there by Dubow, Magubane, Stolten and others, but not mine, which was available on the same website before Stolten published his edited collection of the proceedings of the conference in 2007. She cites the 1977 edition of R. Davenport, *South Africa A Modern History*, as if it were the latest edition, ignoring our joint fifth edition of 2000. She does not mention, say, my article on South African historical writing in relation to apartheid in the *Times Literary Supplement*, April 1994. She cites nothing from the *South African Historical Journal* or *Historia*.
8. For example, J. Seekings and N. Nattrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2005), p 26: “Marxist approaches rapidly became hegemonic …”

historiography book I did not give her responses due attention, it may have been partly because of their political connotations, at a time when the anti-apartheid struggle was at its most intense, but also because I was then mainly focusing my attention on writing by historians, and writing then influential in South Africa, and the early liberal responses were not by professional historians.⁹

To the extent that Lipton's claim that liberal scholars did respond "directly and quickly to the neo-Marxist revisionists" (for example, p 185) is accepted, those liberal scholars were hardly effective in their responses, for it was the revisionists who gained ascendancy from the late 1970s. Her "hostile rhetoric" (the phrase she applies to others) seems to stem in part from a sense that her work has been unduly neglected and very unfairly criticised. Is that the case? I wrote in 1987 that *Capitalism and apartheid* was "one of the most important contributions to twentieth century South African history to have been published in recent years", even if more a work of "political sociology on a time scale" than history as such, and my review was published alongside one by a economist colleague who was correct to say that scholars would "treat it as an authority for years to come".¹⁰ Now, twenty years later, she draws attention to critical points raised in reviews of her book by the historians Hans Erik Stolten and Bill Freund, adding that such "accusations, reiterated by Saunders and numerous others, are false" (p 185). Not only did my review of her book, which appeared before those she cites, not include such "accusations", but by using that word, and the concept of "falseness" rather than disagreement, and such phrases as "a caricature of the truth", citing me (p 35) she turns what could have been fruitful discussions into polemics. Yes, liberal responses, whether by professional historians or not, should have been acknowledged, but by the time I wrote my survey in the mid-1980s, there were no substantial responses to many of the core arguments of the revisionists, and some of those arguments were accepted by later liberal historians, as Lipton herself begins to concede. While she criticises the revisionists for ignoring historical context (for example, p 24), she does this herself, by suggesting that what I and others wrote in the mid-1980s, is somehow current thinking, and fair game to be challenged as such.

For the most part, historiography is presented in these pages in stark contrasts, with liberals in the right and others in the wrong (and not only wrong, but deceitful, et cetera), with very few shades of grey. Where Stanley Trapido found contradictory behaviour in nineteenth-century liberals, it was, Lipton says, because he misunderstood them (p 24). The work of Paul Rich on liberals who supported segregation in the early twentieth century, is dismissed on the grounds that those who supported segregation were not liberals. Howard Pim, Edgar Brookes and others only became liberals when they rejected segregation (p 21). Is it really, as she states, "a foundation stone of the neo-Marxist critique" that "all other" historians "ignored the material and economic dimensions of racism" (p 8)? After stressing that liberal historians dealt with economic issues, she does acknowledge that that key liberal work, *The Oxford History of South Africa* (1969, 1971) was influenced by political preoccupations after 1948, and was concerned to undermine the political myths of the apartheid regime. It "reflected the concerns of its time", she writes (p 12), and liberal

9. Admittedly, some of the revisionist writers of the 1970s were not professional historians either, but a number were.
10. C. Saunders and C. Simkins, Reviews of "Capitalism and apartheid", *South African Historical Journal*, 19, November 1987, pp 206-208.

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historians at that time, she admits, were focused primarily on political, military and ideological issues. She however does not concede the larger point, namely that liberal historians before the 1970s were not concerned with the kind of issues that the revisionists began to address in the 1970s.

Instead of continuing a critique along such lines, let me conclude by saying that we still await a historiographer who will present the balanced kind of history-writing Lipton calls for. As she rightly says, the study of history writing is important, and should be done with care and appropriate nuance. It should certainly be done with less liberal triumphalism than she shows here.

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