

As long ago as 1994, Bill Freund wrote that the “liberal-cum-radical school of South African historiography has long since achieved total victory, real hegemony”. Quoting this passage with approval more than ten years later, Christopher Saunders remarked that “today no major controversy divides the historical profession in South Africa”.¹² It is a pity that no one remembered to inform Merle Lipton in time to prevent her steaming in from Jurassic Park with her new book entitled *Liberals, Marxists and Nationalists*.

Lipton would agree that the last decade or so has seen a convergence of interpretation among South African historians, but she would insist that this is because “the neo-Marxists (who now refer to themselves as progressives or radicals)” have been forced by the weight of the evidence to adopt the “conventional liberal version ... even liberal values and policies, such as market mechanisms and ‘bourgeois’ political institutions” (pp 4-5). Most reprehensibly, however, the neo-Marxists are too dishonest to admit that they have lost. They persist in claiming that it is themselves who have transformed South African history, and they have even upped the volume of their hostile anti-liberal rhetoric, for example at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Why, oh why, do they do this? One reason, according to Lipton, is that they cling to their “taboos” and “mantras” concerning the social construction of human behaviour. They overlook luminaries such as Gary Runciman and Luigi Cavalle-Sforza who have shown that “human beings are part of the animal continuum” and that “our primal, often unconscious drives and emotions – fear, greed, aggression, the craving for status and power” et cetera, have implications for analysis and policy (pp 118-121). I trust that my readers will not hesitate to throw away their taboos and their mantras, but before doing so, they will surely want to know how Lipton arrived at this extraordinary conclusion.

In Chapters 2 (“The Debate about South Africa I: Selected Issues before 1910”) and 3 (“The Debate About South Africa II: Selected Issues 1910-1990”), Lipton takes us on a highlights tour of the historical battles of the 1970s (Legassick on the frontier; Wolpe on the labour reserves; Davies on the white working-class). She

12. C. Saunders, “Four decades of South African academic historical writing: A personal perspective”, in H.E. Stolten (ed), *History Making and Present Day Politics* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 2007), pp 286, 288.

defends the liberal position with some fancy footwork to show that the liberals (Macmillan, Frankel) got there first, and she lands some telling blows (job colour bar), but she never comes close to a knockout punch, for the simple reason that you cannot knock out a straw man. Lipton's targets mostly date back to the 1970s (Legassick, Wolpe, Trapido and the Sussex quartet of Davies/Kaplan/Morris/O'Meara).¹³ There is very little from the 1980s outside of Saunders ("the revisionists' chief praise-singer" – p 20) and Smith's historiographical surveys,¹⁴ and the only books published after 1990 that seem to have grabbed Lipton's attention, are Deborah Posel's *The making of apartheid* (1991) and Dan O'Meara's *Forty lost years* (1996).¹⁵

In addition to its antique flavour, Lipton's choice of texts is selective to the point of evasiveness. Thus we have a couple of Shula Marks' more transient state-of-the-art surveys, but no *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa* and no "Lord Milner and the South African State".¹⁶ We have Wolpe's "From Segregation to Apartheid," but not Lacey's *Working for Boroko*, which substantiates most of its arguments.¹⁷ We have repeated references to *Forty lost years*, but no meaningful engagement with its 70-page "Theoretical Appendix." Most astonishing of all in a book which devotes most of its pages to South Africa's transition to democracy, Lipton completely and utterly ignores the most influential radical work on the subject, namely Saul and Gelb's *The crisis in South Africa*.¹⁸ Whatever else it may be, *Liberals, Marxists and Nationalists* is certainly nothing like the historiographical introduction which its title seems to imply.

The advantage of a polemic, is that you get to stand and fight on your own ground and with your own weapons. The disadvantage of a polemic, is that you will never persuade anybody who did not agree with you in the first place. This being the case, it would be a waste of time to add another four hundred quibbles to the four already cited in the preceding paragraph. It should be sufficient for the reviewer simply to indicate to his readers just where the polemic is going. Unfortunately, this

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- 13. M. Legassick, "The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography", in S. Marks and A. Atmore (eds), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (1971; reprinted by Longman, London, 1980); H. Wolpe, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: from Segregation to Apartheid" (1972; reprinted in W. Beinart and S. Dubow (eds), *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Routledge, London, 1995)); S. Trapido, "'The Friends of the Natives': merchants, peasants and the political and ideological structure of liberalism in the Cape, 1854-1910", in Marks & Atmore, *Economy and Society*; R. Davies, D. Kaplan, M. Morris and D. O'Meara, "Class Struggle and the Periodisation of the State", *Review of African Political Economy*, 7, 1976.
 - 14. C. Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1988); K. Smith, *The Changing Past* (Southern Books, Johannesburg, 1988).
 - 15. D. Posel, *The Making of Apartheid* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991); D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1996).
 - 16. S. Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1986); S. Marks and S. Trapido, "Lord Milner and the South African State", (1979; reprinted in P. Bonner (ed), *Working Papers in Southern African Studies II* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1981).
 - 17. M. Lacey, *Working for Boroko the Origins of a Coercive Labour System in South Africa* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1981).
 - 18. J.S. Saul and S. Gelb, *The Crisis in South Africa* (Zed Press, London, 1986).

particular polemic seems to be going nowhere. Chapter 4 (“The Debate about South Africa III: Other Factors Eroding Apartheid”) is innocent of any kind of historiography, and consists entirely of Lipton’s own unremarkable reflections on her topic. Chapter 5 (“Theory, Politics and Psychology of the Debate”), already alluded to, is the one about throwing away your taboos and embracing *The naked ape* until, all of a sudden on page 132, with a scathing attack on the University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, the funny farm turns nasty.

Among other things we are told that the History Workshop “nurtured political ambitions” and that “liberals were excluded from the workshop”. The “revisionists” constitute a “dominant coterie” who source funding from UN agencies and foreign governments. They intimidate doubters by “vindictive and damaging personal attacks ... [and] systematic denigration of others”. They deliberately “ignore the liberal origins of the allegedly new trends in their work” (“a standard practice among them”); they engage in “the informal blacklisting of anathematized authors” and the “manipulative, talismanic use of referencing”. They assert their own “intellectual property rights, while riding roughshod over those of others”. The “revisionist hegemony” has polarized South African historiography, and the “excluded and demonized” have suffered “baleful, even traumatic, effects, damaging their reputations, careers, and capacity to work” (pp 132-135).

One cannot but be startled and horrified by the intensity of this outburst. The puzzling undercurrent of anger and bitterness which runs through this volume from the very first page, is finally made manifest. Much as one would like to sympathize with Lipton’s obvious pain, one must also feel some measure of irritation that one has spent so much time wading through so many pages of dense argumentation, only to find out that one has been caught up in nothing more significant than somebody else’s private vendetta. Be that as it may, the extremely personal nature of Lipton’s attack ensures that this is not the book to reopen a debate that many of us, agreeing with Freund and Saunders, had thought was decently dead and buried.

After the histrionics of Chapter 5, Chapter 6 is something of an anti-climax. It opens with a section called “Resentments of, and against, White Liberals”, the targets of which are Kadar Asmal and Barney Pityana, neither of whom can by any stretch of the imagination be termed either a neo-Marxist or a historian. It continues with Lipton’s reflections on a variety of topics: Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa; tensions within the tripartite alliance; BEE and affirmative action; the problems of the unemployed. The only card-carrying historian who appears anywhere at all in the chapter, apart from Hermann Giliomee who makes two guest appearances as a political commentator, is one James Myburgh, who gives us the less-than-incisive insight that Thabo Mbeki should be viewed as a “Leninist of a special type” (p 158). Lipton herself contributes the thought that “if the neo-Marxist revisionist model of a non-reforming ... South Africa had prevailed, the imposition of comprehensive sanctions and intensified revolutionary activity might well have been attempted. The likely consequences would have been a devastating civil war, possibly ending in partition, as well as even greater destruction of neighbouring countries” (p 171). The power that we had! Thank goodness, we failed.

Halfway through the book, I was still intending to call this review “The Kraken Wakes”, after the mythical ocean monster which awakens with a mighty roar,

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only to die the instant it hits the surface. Unfortunately, there is no awakening at the end, no mighty roar. There is only the resentful tirade of an isolated individual, who has become so absorbed in her own monologue that she fails to realise that her interlocutors have long since left the room.

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