

***Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists. Competing interpretations of South African History***<sup>1</sup>

**A Rejoinder to my Reviewers**

***Merle Lipton***

We hoped that [this aspect of South Africa's past] "was decently dead & buried" – Professor Jeff Peires

"The past is not dead; in fact it is not even past" – William Faulkner

The aspect of South Africa's past that Jeff Peires (in his review of *Liberals, Marxists and Nationalists*) hoped was "decently dead and buried", was the conduct of *historians* in the debate between the (self-styled) "neo-Marxist revisionist" and liberal historians. This debate, which dominated much of South African historiography during the closing decades of the twentieth century, centred on the relationship between capitalism and apartheid, and the role of white liberals in South Africa. Peires' demand that this debate be buried, was supported by some of the other prominent historians, particularly Chris Saunders and Hugh Macmillan, who contributed to the book feature in *Historia*, November 2008.

The most important issues in this debate are the substantive questions – namely the roles played by business and by white liberals in eroding or propping up apartheid. These are important both for our understanding of our past and because of the influence of historical perceptions on social and political relations in post-apartheid South Africa. How important is the issue of the intellectual and professional competence and integrity of historians, and other social scientists, in handling these sensitive questions? This issue is certainly of less importance to the general public, but it is, surely, an issue that historians need to take seriously.

Most of your reviewers paid little attention to the substantive issues. Moreover, they did not question, indeed barely dealt with, the veracity of my account of the revisionist-liberal disputes. Their objection is that *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists* reopens old wounds; that the debate has moved on and the issue is "antique"; and that to reflect on this record is "petty" and flogging "a very dead horse". This is largely based on their belief that I fail to recognise that the revisionists' claims of "transforming" South African history – in the process revealing the shortcomings of earlier (especially liberal) historians – that such claims are "a thing of the past", with the whole episode ended by the publication in 2002 of (yet another transformative?) essay in which they showed that the liberal and Marxist analyses of capitalism and apartheid have much in common.

Yet, far from denying that the revisionist analysis shifted (towards that of the liberals), *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*, and the papers that preceded it, *document* this very shift – and the fudged, stealthy way it took place, with the

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1 A paperback issue is available now of *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists. Competing interpretations of South African History* (Pan Books, Johannesburg, 2009) ISBN 978023061422 Price: R199 00

revisionists omitting the standard, professional references to the scholars whose positions they were adopting and whom they had previously marginalized and/or berated.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the revisionists shifted behind a smokescreen of continuing hostile rhetoric against the liberals. It is understandably irritating for the former revisionists, and their advocates, to be reminded of their roles in this disgraceful episode – so irritating that Saunders deems my book, with its exposures, “unsuitable for students”.<sup>3</sup> But it is, surely, the role of historians to record, rather than bury the past, however embarrassing this might be for the actors involved (in this case, historians themselves).

It is true that the claims of the revisionists (who now refer to themselves as radicals) are now less often made and are more vaguely couched, but, as is shown below, these claims continue – as does their systematic sidelining of those outside their ranks. What certainly continues, is the style or mode of making boastful claims for themselves, while dismissing the work of others. This mode was indeed a transformation introduced into South African historical studies – during what the revisionists and their admirers term the “golden age” during which they were “hegemonic”.<sup>4</sup> This mode is surely evident in Saunders’ assertion that *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists* is unsuitable (“not to be recommended”) for students, who should instead be referred to his own “balanced, dispassionate” survey of the historiography of that period.

Peires suggests that I should be satisfied now that the former revisionists/radicals have expanded their claims to encompass a joint “liberal-cum-radical” transformation of, and hegemony over, South African history, but I do not support this claim, nor approve of intellectual hegemonies. My argument was, in part, that we need to recognise the continuity of our work with that of earlier historians, including liberals, conservatives, radicals and nationalists, as well as the debt we owe to contemporaries who dissent from and thereby challenge us. Intellectual hegemonies are undesirable; analysts should strive to think independently, rather than fitting in with fashions or coteries, which encourage ganging up in groups, distinguishing between insiders and outsiders, and indulging in “job reservation” practices on behalf of group members. This invariably leads to cronyism and to a lowering of standards.

Also surprising is Saunders’ criticism that I do not seem to realise that, in the atmosphere prevailing during the 1970s and 1980s, the liberal analysis was politically unacceptable. Hence, he writes, “to defend progressive capital ... was hardly likely to win one friend” and if the liberal analysis did not receive “due attention”, this was because of its “political connotations”. This is the basis for the accusation that my

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2 In papers presented at conferences at Sussex University in 2000 and at Copenhagen University in 2002, I pointed to the growing convergence between the liberal and revisionist analyses, and documented the revisionist shifts. Far from welcoming my recognition of this shift, there was a 4-year delay in publication of the Copenhagen conference book, while attempts were made to force the editor, Hans Erik Stolten, to drop my paper. Stolten refused, although the paper was eventually cut drastically.

3 A similar claim that *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists* was “unsuitable” for students was made by an anonymous reader who urged Palgrave MacMillan not to publish it.

4 On this claim, see *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*, p 135.

approach is “ahistorical”. However, far from not recognising the influence of political considerations, I argued that this was part of the explanation for the revisionists’ denial that business was pressing for reform and for their anxiety to distance themselves from, and attack, the liberals – even when adopting their analysis. Saunders’ refreshingly frank explanation is precisely what I was suggesting.

At least we now agree that the revisionist analysis was influenced by political considerations. What remains at issue is whether it is justifiable to bend one’s work to political requirements, and to ostracise or attack dissenting colleagues. Is this what the former revisionists and their followers teach their students? Complete objectivity is impossible, but it is, surely, the duty of historians, and other social scientists, to resist – indeed lean against – both political pressures and their own personal preferences and prejudices. To tailor one’s analysis to political, ideological or personal considerations, is the ultimate *trahison des clercs*. Moreover, to adapt Marx’s adage, if historians propagate misunderstandings of the world, are they likely to change it for the better? The revisionists’ highly politicised history, pervaded by hostility towards liberals, contributed towards current hostility towards liberal values, which some former revisionists, to their credit, now seem to regret. Better to tell it as straight as one can, and not play God with the truth.

Saunders makes another disconcerting point when – ignoring my documentation of the quick response by liberals to the first revisionist claims – he writes: “to the extent that Lipton’s claim ... is accepted” (has he not checked the references provided in *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*<sup>5</sup>), their response must have been ineffective, “for it was the revisionists who gained ascendancy” and their version which became “hegemonic”. Is this a survival-of-the-fittest (perhaps *à la* E.H. Carr) ranking of historians, namely the version that becomes hegemonic or dominant must, *ipso facto*, be superior? If so, does this apply – during the periods of their hegemony – to the neo-conservative version of the Cold War, the Stalinist version of Russian history and the Afrikaner nationalist version of South African history?

It is to Saunders’ credit that he now accepts, albeit behind the smokescreen of an aggressive attack, that his former sweeping claims on behalf of the revisionists require amendment (I accept “a number though by no means all of her [Lipton’s] arguments about what happened ... I was too ready to embrace revisionist perspectives ... now, I would write very differently [and my book] ... requires major recasting”). However, Saunders is mistaken in claiming that I categorised him as a neo-Marxist revisionist. I described him, and some of their other advocates, as being “outside their

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5 It seems not, for a couple of paragraphs later he reiterates: “by the time I wrote my survey ... there were no substantial responses to the core arguments of the revisionists, and some of those arguments were accepted by later liberal historians, as Lipton ... concedes” No, it was the other way round: it was the revisionists, not liberals, who shifted. Saunders’ survey was published in 1987, long after the publications by Bell, Kantor, Kenny and others, listed in *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*. Saunders also continues to misunderstand my point that, while Thompson, Davenport and others were always mainly focused on political issues, other liberal historians, such as Van der Horst, Horwitz, Frankel and O’Dowd continued to focus on economic issues throughout the 1950s and 1960s

ranks”, thus giving added credibility to their claims.<sup>6</sup> I made a point of noting the one issue on which he dissented from the revisionist attack on the liberals (the still widely-cited claim that liberals were originators of the doctrine of segregation). I was aware that Saunders, in his earlier work, wrote favourably about W.M. Macmillan and De Kiewiet. I was thus puzzled by his endorsement of the revisionist claims, including their insistence that these earlier historians ignored the material dimensions of racism. It however is for Saunders (not me) to explain this contradiction! My focus was not on his work in general, but on those aspects related to the debate about apartheid, capitalism and white liberals. The relevant work was his historiography, which I cited frequently.

The question *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists* raises of professional misconduct – in freezing out and discrediting dissidents/rivals – is hardly special to historians. There are frequent accounts of similar problems among medical doctors, civil servants, the police, auditors, and others. Unfortunately, the familiar response of dismissing and discrediting critics and whistle-blowers is evident both in the dismissive comments cited above and in the warning that I should stay off the “turf” of historians. Thus Saunders declares that I am not even a “professional historian [but merely] ... a researcher and consultant”. I certainly am a researcher (are not all historians?), but I am not a “consultant” (where did he get that from?). Did I not qualify as a historian when reviewers in the *South African Historical Journal* of November 1987 (including Saunders himself) described my earlier book, *Capitalism & Apartheid*, as “one of the most important contributions to 20<sup>th</sup> century South African history ... [which] scholars would treat as an authority for years to come”? Drawing rigid boundaries between disciplines and analysts is limiting, parochial and confusing. It is the work that counts.<sup>7</sup>

More briefly, may I respond to some of the specific (positive and negative) points raised by your five reviewers? I am gratified that Louwrens Pretorius finds my work in some respects “an inspiration ... [that] provides a valuable perspective on scholarly crafts and ... induce[s] questions about academic methods and morals”. I also understand that Pretorius finds my book in other respects “a disappointment” and discuss below some of the areas in which, I agree, it falls short. However, I am disappointed that Pretorius absolves himself from judging “the relative merits” of the conflicting liberal and neo-Marxist interpretations, specifically declining to assess whether their respective “central propositions ... are flawed or not”. With respect, it is part of the job of the historian/reviewer to do just this, based on a careful examination of the evidence and analysis (Saunders does not shrink from this, despite the embarrassing turnaround in which this involves him). Instead, Pretorius caricatures my argument as being that “the Marxists were wrong”. In summing up their contribution, I wrote (*Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*, p 117) that the revisionists’ best work, “builds on what was there and stands alongside contributions

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6 Likewise, I do not, as Peires claims, describe Barney Pityana and Kader Asmal as revisionists, but as examples of political agents who were influenced by the negative stereotypes of liberals that were reinforced by revisionist history

7 The problems caused by Saunders’ attempt to draw rigid lines between disciplines would presumably also apply to revisionists such as O’Meara, Davies and Kaplan, whom Saunders once described as among those “transforming” South African history, but whose background is mainly in Sociology or Political Economy, unlike mine, which is mainly in History

by others” and that some of their work, even when mistaken, was “suggestive and stimulating” (*Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*, p 14). It is not good enough for Pretorius to say that revisionists make similar accusations against liberals when the evidence is readily available in the form of their respective publications, on the basis of which judgements can be made. Pretorius should be prepared to stick his head above the parapet.

As noted above, there is surprisingly little discussion of the substantive issues by your reviewers, with the exception of Norman Bromberger and, to lesser extent, Hugh Macmillan. Bromberger accepts my central argument about the changing relationship between capitalism and apartheid, but makes some critical points. First, he complains that *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists* pays relatively little attention to (Afrikaner or African) nationalists. I accept this point, which was also made by Pretorius. The problem was that, with the exception of Giliomee, those writing from an Afrikaner nationalist perspective did not focus on the capitalism-apartheid relationship. This was also true of African nationalist historians who, with the exception of Magubane and Nolutshungu, barely dealt with this issue.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, Bromberger, while welcoming the section on behavioural theory in Chapter 5, politely implies that it was rather thin. Reservations were also expressed by Kenneth Hughes and Michael Lipton, who read the manuscript. I accept this point, which reflects my lack of expertise in this field. I decided to include this section because I wanted to flag the relevance of this growing area of research to historical and social studies. One of my main criticisms of the revisionists was of their underlying, unstated behavioural assumptions, particularly their invariably negative depictions of the behaviour of “wicked” employers, liberals, the West contrasted with the invariably noble behaviour of workers, “progressives” and anti-Westernisers. This Manichean behavioural theory obscures the fact that all people are driven by a mixture of (crude or enlightened) self-interest, beliefs and emotions, which can include altruism. Few South African social scientists pay attention to the huge advances in behavioural theory, which are rendering it inadequate to base assessments of individual and social behaviour solely on common sense or, as is frequently the case, simplistic stereotypes and gut reactions.

Historians cannot be experts in all areas, but they can try to acquire minimal scientific literacy from the accessible accounts by Dennett, Pinker, and others referred to in *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*, of the mounting challenges to many long-established behavioural assumptions and prejudices. For Peires to scoff at this plea is unworthy of the author of *The Dead Will Arise*, his fine book that, *inter alia*, illustrates the extent to which the behaviour of all of us is driven by irrational, emotional drives. Indeed, the events discussed in these exchanges in *Historia* should give Peires further pause for thought – the obvious drive to be “hegemonic” even within the sheltered ivory towers, including by those who make bold claims of their

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8 However Pretorius is over the top in claiming that I refer only “briefly” to Giliomee, with some “scattered references” to Van der Merwe. There are over 15 references to Giliomee, including discussions within the text (pp 15f, 74f, 114, 145f), and Van der Merwe and J S Marais figure significantly in Chapter 2 on the pre-Union period. Nor were the references to African historians, particularly Nolutshungu, as cursory as he suggests (see pp 74-75, 85)

intellectual and moral superiority, surely gives support to what he scoffs at as “Lipton’s extraordinary views [that we are] ... part of the animal continuum ... [influenced by] our primal, often unconscious drives and emotions – fear, greed, aggression, the craving for status and power”.

Hugh Macmillan raises interesting questions about my assessment of the factors that eroded apartheid, but misunderstands my position on some central issues. Far from denying the importance of market forces, I stressed their salience throughout, especially in the 1960s and 1980s. I agree with him that the impact of the 1973 oil price rise might have been more significant than I and others recognised (partly because it seemed overshadowed by the rise in the gold price) and that this question needs further research. Why does Macmillan however think I would find “inconvenient” research which might shed light on the impact of this price rise on a trend that I identified as beginning immediately after the 1970 election? And where does he get the idea from that I subscribe to the “prosperity will undermine apartheid” school? The word “prosperity” hardly appears in my early or late books, where the argument, page after page, is that it was rising costs, due to economic expansion and growing mechanisation, that drove the South African government to acquiesce in the erosion of apartheid. Nor did I describe this process as “voluntary”, but as arising from various pressures and choices. Nor does this emphasis on structural factors lead me, as Macmillan asserts, to “dismiss armed struggle, mass mobilisation ... and most sanctions”. Instead, I depicted them (*Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*, Chapter 4) as important political agents that actively influenced the nature of the changes once structural economic conditions (which business was crucial in pushing through) became more favourable. On sanctions, my view was that the “jury is still out” and that the effects were complex, including not only those of financial sanctions, but also cultural pressures and influences: the sticks-and-carrots policy of “constructive engagement” that is now widely advocated (in relation to other countries) as preferable to the comprehensive economic sanctions that many once advocated as likely to “bring the South African economy to its knees”. My assessment of the pressures ending apartheid was summed up as “a combination of reforms from above and pressures from below, interacting with and reinforcing each other” (*Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*, p 105).

Hugh Macmillan’s criticism that my analysis is “hard” on NGOs and trade unions raises the “political considerations” issue: whether it is not the job of historians to tell it like it is, regardless of whether this is hard/soft on various agents. In fact, trade union leaders themselves made similar hard-headed assessments of their vulnerability during the 1970s; hence their caution in taking on the apartheid state when they were too weak to do this (*Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*, Chapter 4). This saved them to fight another day and play an increasingly important role during the transition period in the early 1990s. Macmillan raises similar objections to my analysis of armed struggle, particularly my “strange logic” that, while the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1987 was a setback to South Africa, it was also a setback for the ANC, which was forced to move from its bases in Angola. Yet, some ANC leaders recognised this and, notwithstanding their public rhetoric, this reinforced their growing realisation that they would not be able to defeat South Africa militarily in the foreseeable future. This strengthened those elements in the ANC pressing for (and already tentatively exploring) negotiations. Facing the “hard” truth, refusing to

beguile themselves and others with seductive, politically-motivated untruths, secured a better outcome in the long term.

Assessments of the factors eroding apartheid are issues on which one can disagree. It is good that Macmillan engages with them, but regrettable that he concludes by dismissing me as “a paternalist, condescending liberal” – thus confirming that the arrogant mode of behaviour that became acceptable during the revisionists’ “golden age” is by no means (what Macmillan describes as) “a very dead horse”.

In his ferocious attack on my “boring ... antique” book, Jeff Peires correctly cites my charge that leading revisionists “nurtured political ambitions ... [and constituted a] dominant coterie who excluded others”. It is however unclear whether what “startled and horrified” Peires is my recording of this, or the indubitable fact that revisionists said/did these things (the references are cited in *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*, p 132). Where was Peires while all this was going on? It seems unlikely that he was in deep slumber (like the extinct “kraken” he likens me to) for he staged a similarly intemperate attack on Harrison Wright’s 1977 critique of revisionist scholarship and behaviour, which he dismissed as “not only a very bad book but a very dangerous one”.<sup>9</sup> If Wright’s thoughtful, challenging book had been taken seriously, instead of rubbished, the work of the revisionists – and South African history – would be in a much better state. However, at the end of that intemperate attack, Peires pleaded for an end to the obsessive political categorisation of historians – an appeal which I quoted with approval (*Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*, p 136). Peires seems to have missed this. He also missed much else, hence his claim that I make “no reference whatsoever” to Stephen Gelb, when on p 117, I describe Gelb and other dissident Marxists, as “marginalized”.<sup>10</sup> By this I obviously meant that their work had not received the attention it merited in the mainstream academic debate, as evidenced by the lack of “any reference whatsoever” to Gelb, or other dissident Marxists, in the historiographical surveys of Marks, Saunders or Ken Smith (correctly identified by Saunders as the standard, in other words most cited works of the period).

How extraordinary that Peires now rejects my argument on the grounds that it is partly based on what he refers to as the “transient” historiographical surveys by Shula Marks.<sup>11</sup> These surveys, in which the revisionist claims are most clearly set out, have been widely cited by many scholars, including all subsequent historiographers. Does Peires also dismiss as “transient” Marks’ recent claim that *South Africa’s 1940s* (published in 2005) contains “new perspectives”, when these are, once again, a return to what others had been saying for decades about reformist trends during the 1940s and with, as usual, no reference to this by her (discussed in *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*, p 188)? Are historians not to be judged by how their work stands up in the medium-to-long term?

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9 *Social Dynamics*, 1977, 3(1), pp 63-66

10 Gelb’s more recent work is also cited in Chapter 6

11 Peires is mistaken in claiming that I do not refer to any other work by Marks. The bibliography lists half-a-dozen works written/edited/contributed to by her and relevant to my theme

Finally, Peires accuses me of waging a “personal vendetta”. Are those of us who have been attacked not permitted to respond? How else can this be done except by providing a detailed account of the record – in this case, an account that has not been refuted by reviewers who were participants in the debate who have, instead, dismissed my account as “petty, antique, boring, ... a storm in a teacup”. Their evasive, complacent response gives no weight to the need to set the record straight; ignores the influence of historical beliefs on political developments; and brushes aside the professional consequences, both for standards of historical research and for the making – and unmaking – of professional reputations and careers.

My book argues that we need a period of reflection, primarily on the substantive intellectual issues – such as why did so many analysts get it so wrong? – but also on professional issues about the conduct of the debate, in particular, why those whose analysis turned out to be closer to the truth were sidelined or, when this did not work, traduced. This process of reflection needs to be undertaken, not by stealth and obfuscation, but in a straightforward way that clears the air by providing an honest account of who said what and when – the careful, detailed, sometimes boring record that historians are expected to produce. This will provide the basis for a restoration of the solid, honest work practices and ethics established by pioneering South African historians – whether liberal, conservative, radical or nationalist, based on the principles of: (i) striving to tell the truth and be even-handed, regardless of political, ideological, social and personal preferences; and (ii) observing long-established academic rules and proprieties by providing proper acknowledgments, whether to rivals/opponents or favourites/friends, and urging their students to do likewise.

Peires is right to suggest that confronting these issues is painful (I would add, even distasteful), but is this not a necessary part of clearing our minds? If, as some of your reviewers urge, we bury the painful episodes in our past, how can we learn from experience – and is this not what historians, *par excellence*, are supposed to do? Instead of burying the past, we should heed William Faulkner’s insight that “The past is not dead; in fact it is not even past”. It continues to boil, seethe and shape us. Recognising this is part of the process by which we historians equip ourselves to record and analyse the past as fully and accurately as we can.