

***Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists. Competing interpretations of South African History***

**A Rejoinder to a Rejoinder**

*Chris Saunders*

In the course of her eight-page rejoinder [*Historia*, May 2009] to the five reviews of her book [*Historia*, November 2008], Merle Lipton writes of my “aggressive attack” on her book. It is always difficult to know whether or not to respond to such a rejoinder. Will one, in so doing, give a book that does not deserve much attention even more attention? On the other hand, not to reply will leave Lipton with the last word and readers unclear about how the reviewers would respond to what she says. For this reason I have decided that I should briefly address some of the inaccurate and misleading assertions that she makes about what I had said in my review.

As had been pointed out in the reviews, her book is a strong attack on neo-Marxist revisionist historians and their writing. Let me note that none of the three historians among the five scholars who were asked to review her book, are known to be neo-Marxist revisionist historians, yet all agreed that her book is deeply flawed. I have always identified myself as a “liberal” historian and did not think myself that my review was an “aggressive attack”, though I pointed to major flaws in her analysis and regretted the tone in which the book was written. How “aggressive” my review was, I will to readers to judge; at least she does not call it “ferocious”, the word she uses for the review by Jeff Peires. She includes me among those who “demand that this debate [that between neo-Marxists and liberals] be buried” because addressing it “reopens old wounds”. This is to misunderstand my position. The debate was clearly important in its time, and if new perspectives on it can be opened from the present, that would be a very useful thing to do. There is some attempt to do that in her book, but as my review pointed out, her book is ahistorical in the sense that she often writes as if a debate of the 1970s and 1980s is somehow continuing today, and she fails to place that debate in its historical context. As for “reopening old wounds” – to address issues is one thing, to write in the highly polemical style she does, is another. It is important to analyse the roles played by business and by white liberals in eroding or propping up apartheid, and in addressing such issues, historians should of course exhibit the “competence and integrity” she calls for. How unfortunate, therefore, that she does not show those qualities in her own writing. In her rejoinder she says again that when revisionists shifted their approaches in recent years, they did so in a “fudged, stealthy way ... behind a smokescreen of continuing hostile rhetoric against the liberals”. Yet her own rhetoric is more hostile to the revisionists than any they have used in recent years. Ironically, she then goes on to ask the rhetorical question: “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)”. Elsewhere she writes of the need to “set the record straight”. How unfortunate that her book does not do just that.

She writes of the revisionists still “making boastful claims for themselves, while dismissing the work of others. 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". This is another misrepresentation: I did indeed say that what was needed was a balanced, dispassionate survey, and pointed to the irony that she herself called for such a survey in a book that was far removed from being such a balanced survey. My own survey, written well over twenty years ago in a particular historical context and long out of print, is, I would be the first to admit, not the work I had in mind when calling for the balanced survey that is needed now. Anyone who knows the field will realise, as of course I do, that my survey is now very out of date and is not to be recommended for anyone wanting a twenty-first century perspective on the debate. Her suggestion that I might think it a survey to be recommended in 2009 (the year in which she wrote her rejoinder) shows her again to be out of touch and is further evidence of her inability to see work in its historical context. My survey was of course written when the debate was at its height, and my reading of South African historiography today is not what it was over twenty years ago. What I did in my review of her book, was show that her work is ahistorical in that it does not place writing by me and others in the context of the time in which it was written.

"What remains at issue", she writes, "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?" The suggestion that I and others teach students to ostracise and attack colleagues is almost libellous, and anyone who knows the inclusive approach adopted by historians in South Africa over the years, will reject this out of hand. Where in her work is the tolerance and even-tempered judgment that I and others have long admired in the work of the best liberal scholars? I mentioned in my review that she was not a professional historian not to suggest that she should "stay off the 'turf' of historians". I agree it is the work that counts, not who the writer is, but who one is does influence what one writes, and I mentioned her career trajectory because it may help explain why she appears to be so out of touch with recent developments in the field.

Let me respond briefly to other misrepresentations in her rejoinder. To say that the revisionists' version became "hegemonic" for a time, is not to say it was right or superior; that hegemonic moment was, I agree fortunately, short-lived, but in her book she failed to recognise it. She goes on to say in her rejoinder that she was "aware that Saunders, in his earlier work, wrote favourably about W.M. Macmillan and De Kiewiet" and "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!" This however is again misleading, for she suggests a contradiction where there is none: it was not in earlier work, but in the same book, published in 1988, that I wrote about both the liberals and the revisionists, giving far more space and attention to the former than to the latter. In a survey I was drawing readers' attention to what the revisionists were saying, not necessarily endorsing what they said. While many of the revisionists were indeed very ignorant of earlier writing and too ready to assert that they were discovering something new, does Lipton not accept that Macmillan and De Kiewiet did underplay the material dimensions of racism? While appreciative of the immense

contribution these giants made to our historiography, I was also aware of the limitations of their work. One surely wants a nuanced assessment, rather than the Liptonian world in which the liberal historians of which she approves are right and others are written off as not only wrong, but also guilty of deception and worse.

What is unfortunate about Lipton's book, and is evident again in her rejoinder, is that she does not do what she herself calls for. What we need, I agree, is a focus on the substantive intellectual issues, which as she rightly says, are the important things, not the personal attacks in which she engages. Let us be, as she concludes, even-handed, and I look forward to a work in which she carries forward the debate in an even-handed way. Her book, alas, does not do that.

## Response to Saunders

*Merle Lipton*

In his "Rejoinder", as in his original review, Chris Saunders does not address the issues of substance raised in my book, *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists*. These issues concern:

1. The conflicting liberal and neo-Marxist interpretations of the forces leading to the establishment, and then erosion, of segregation/apartheid, particularly the roles of capital, labour, Afrikaner nationalists and white liberals in these processes.
2. The neo-Marxist claim that they "transformed" South African history by showing that the main responsibility for racist policies lay with capital and, in relation to the ideology of segregation, with white liberals. Neo-Marxists also claimed that liberal historians failed to recognise, or even obfuscated, these truths, and shifted the responsibility for racism onto white workers and Afrikaner nationalists.
3. The challenge to these claims by liberal, and other, historians. Their challenges – reinforced by the course of events (which undermined the claim that capitalism and apartheid were inextricably linked) – led to the gradual abandonment of their paradigm by the neo-Marxists, culminating in their adoption of much of the liberal analysis. This shift was made in a fudged manner, without the standard academic acknowledgements to the work of those they had denigrated and marginalized.
4. These central sections of *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists* are followed by discussion of: (i) the political and other factors that might explain the paradox that, despite this record, the neo-Marxists acquired a dominant position in South African historical and social studies during the final decades of the twentieth century; (ii) the continuing influence of their (now partly abandoned) historical mistakes and misjudgements on political attitudes in post-apartheid South Africa; (iii) the lessons for historians about the effects on

their work of political commitments and group/personal loyalties and antipathies.

Saunders says little about, and does not challenge, my detailed evidence and argument on the three core issues, but focuses mainly on 4(i) – the possible explanations for the wide acceptance of the (now partly discarded) neo-Marxist claims, including by many outside their ranks, such as Saunders himself. Behind the smokescreen of personal attacks on me, Saunders now agrees that his widely-cited historiography of this debate requires major revision. He also concurs that political considerations were a major factor explaining both the neo-Marxist interpretation and its favourable reception. However, while the anti-apartheid struggle might well explain the unwillingness of the neo-Marxists to concede that, from the 1970s, significant reforms were underway in South Africa (albeit by a government that continued to do other horrible things), this does not readily explain their hostility to progressive capital and, even more so, to (past and contemporary) liberals. Saunders is outraged by my suggestion that the explanation for this lies partly in personal and psychological factors, including the “groupthink” encouraged by the mobilisation of academics into exclusive “schools” or coteries, and by personal rivalries, ambition and plain nastiness. (I did not suggest such behaviour was special to Marxists, but that it is encouraged by group mobilisation and the acquisition of power and patronage in academe – as elsewhere.)

Instead of engaging with the main issues, Saunders brushes aside my arguments by asserting that my approach is “ahistorical”, that I am “out of touch” with recent research, and that this whole debate is passé. Saunders’ heated reaction hardly suggests that these issues are passé; instead his reaction echoes the frank demand by Jeff Peires (in his review in the *Historia* Book Feature) that this embarrassing period in South African historical studies be treated as “dead and buried” – a strange plea from a historian. But these issues – race/class, the role of capital, white liberals and African and Afrikaner nationalists – will not go away, and they continue to be debated, for example, in recent books by Charles Feinstein and Mario Scerri. What is clearly not passé, is the habit, characteristic of the neo-Marxists and their admirers, of denigrating and marginalizing the work of their critics, instead of seriously engaging their arguments.

I would be grateful if Saunders provided me with references to relevant recent work that I failed to consult. He does not define “ahistoricism”. If he means the projection backwards in time of attitudes/standards now current, but not understood or held in earlier times, this charge of out-of-context judgements based on hindsight surely does not apply to what is a very recent debate, involving participants still working in the field, whose interpretations were immediately challenged by their contemporaries. Moreover, while the political context can shed light on the mistakes and misjudgements of historians, it does not justify them. Surely the extent to which historical analysis holds up over time is a major criterion of its value?

At any rate, we now agree that political considerations distorted the work of South African historians. This surely reinforces the argument of *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists* that historians should, in their professional work, strive for

detachment and resist calls to be “politically engaged” in the sense of trying, in their work, to promote political causes or agendas. Such manipulations will not only intensify their unavoidable biases, but are also likely to have unintended long-term consequences. Among examples of these are some recent versions of the triumphalist “liberation narrative” which omit or deny the significant role played by various whites, including progressive capital, Marxists and liberals and, later, the strategically placed Afrikaner *verligtes*, in opposing and, eventually, helping to erode apartheid. These distortions and misunderstandings – partly fuelled by the neo-Marxist paradigm – influence public opinion and “race relations” in contemporary South Africa, with consequences which some former neo-Marxists may now regret. Rather than excusing errors and omissions on the grounds that it was politically necessary at the time to distance themselves from X and identify with Y, historians should strive to “tell it as straight as they can”. Solidarity with even the noblest cause is no excuse for mistakes and misjudgements, or for their unintended, long-term consequences.

## Rejoinder to Lipton’s Rejoinder

*Chris Saunders*

Merle Lipton’s second rejoinder has, not surprisingly, the hallmarks of her first and of her book itself. As I and others pointed out in reviewing her book, much of it is written in a polemical style, and it was because she adopted such an approach that, when asked whether I wished to reply to her first rejoinder, I asked if she would be allowed space to reply yet again. Though I was informed that she would not be, the editor nevertheless has agreed to publish this second rejoinder, so I must reluctantly respond again, lest it be thought I have nothing further to say. Readers can judge for themselves whether my previous reply was in fact “heated”, and whether anything that I wrote suggested that I was “outraged” by what she said. Instead of putting up what she now says is “a smokescreen of personal attacks on me”, I was merely responding to what she wrote. I will here respond briefly to some of her other points, which again misrepresent my views.

In writing my previous response, I was saddened, certainly, that the way she was defending her liberal position might give the liberal approach I value a bad name. Her approach is to damn the neo-Marxists and accuse them of denigrating the work of others. I think that their work, seen in its context, did contribute to an understanding of the relationship between capitalism and apartheid, especially in the early years of that relationship. I am glad that she now at least acknowledges that I am, and have always been, “outside their ranks”, which is not what her book suggested.

I do not know how she can think that I believe that the substantive issues she discusses, are “passé”. I argued that she discusses them in the context of what I suggested is a flawed historiography. The substantive issues are of course important, but in my original review, I explicitly said that I would focus on the historiography, though I mentioned her seminal contribution on the substantive issues in the 1980s and drew attention to recent writing missing from her book’s bibliography. Other reviewers in these pages criticized her treatment of the substantive issues, as I did

briefly in my review of her book in the *South African Historical Journal*, 61, 2, of June 2009. It is not possible in a necessarily brief review or rejoinder to enter into a detailed discussion of these issues, but suffice it to say that anyone who knows the relevant historiography, will know that the idea that progressive big business played a major role in the collapse of apartheid, or that the main pillars of apartheid began to be undermined from 1970, is not generally accepted. Historians will of course continue to be concerned with the reasons for the collapse of apartheid, but I very much doubt that they will share Lipton's view of the relative unimportance of mass resistance or, say, of the changed regional context, stressed *inter alia* by Hugh Macmillan in his review of her book.

What a disappointment, then, that someone who made so important a contribution in her seminal work, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, has now, in her more recent book and her two replies, not taken what she calls "the debate" further, but has instead indulged in polemic and presented what, as I and most of the other reviewers of her book in these pages suggest, is a flawed interpretation both of the debate itself, and of its historiography.