REVIEW ARTICLES

The Owl of Minerva and the Ironic Fate of the Progressive Praxis of Radical Historiography in Post-apartheid South Africa[1]

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History Making and Present Day Politics: The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa. Edited by Hans Erik Stolten. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007. 376 pp.

This review essay reflects on issues raised by a recent edited volume. Despite its title and stated objectives, 'History Making and Present Day Politics' does not provide a broad and inclusive survey of post-apartheid South African historiographical developments. Its main topic is the unexpected demise in the post-apartheid context of the radical or revisionist approach that had invigorated and transformed the humanities and social studies during the 1970s and 1980s. In the context of the anti-apartheid struggle the radical historians had developed a plausible model of praxis for progressive scholarship, yet in the new post-apartheid democratic South Africa radical historical scholarship itself encountered a crisis of survival. This should not be confused with a general 'crisis' of historical scholarship in South Africa, as some of the uneven contributions to this volume contend, as that remains an active and diversely productive field due also to substantial contributions by historians not based in South Africa. If the dramatic and ironic fate of radical historical scholarship in the context of the transition to a post-apartheid democracy is the volume's primary topic, then it unfortunately fails to provide serious and sustained critical reflection on the origins and possible explanations of that crisis. It is argued that a marked feature of the accounts of 'history making' provided in this volume is the (former) radical historians' lack of self-reflexivity and the scant interest shown in the underlying history of their own intellectual trajectories.

Of late, South African history and historiography have been considered to have more than parochial significance only. Certainly the scope, drama and significance of developments in this part of Africa have been the subject of a range of historical

1 A slightly different version of this review essay first appeared in *History and Theory*, 49(2), 2010. Thanks to *History and Theory* for permission to feature this adapted essay here.

accounts. It is a complex story amenable to diverse interpretations. Historians, and not South Africans only, have played their part in telling and shaping this dramatic and ironic story: in the early nineteenth century missionaries like Dr John Philip of the London Missionary Society instigated and provoked settler apologists to document their version of the colonial encounter for the public record;[2] in the 1870s the British historian Froude and novelist Trollope were intellectual midwives to the discovery of the very notion of 'South African society';[3] pioneering local historians like Theal and Cory produced the founding histories of a settler society in imperial and colonial perspectives; at a popular level their successors narrated the nation variously as the story of the '(white) South African', 'Afrikaner', 'Zulu' and 'African' nations, and of the inevitable conflicts between these; among professional historians the liberal mainstream, epitomised by Wilson and Thompson's *Oxford History of South Africa* (1969), construed apartheid as a throwback to a frontier mentality obstructing progress in modern South Africa; in their turn, a new generation of radical historians, many of them based at universities in London, Oxford and the USA, engaged this liberal orthodoxy from the 1960s with revisionist interpretations and ideological disputes on class and race and the role of capitalism in apartheid society even as the anti-apartheid struggle escalated; meanwhile a growing interest in social history and 'history from below', also building on the available resources of oral histories, challenged the hegemony of these grand narratives. (However, professional historians tended to keep their distance from the post-apartheid project of 'dealing with the past' through the Truth and Reconciliation process.)

A notable feature of this considerable body of South African historiography is the substantial contribution by historians not based in South Africa itself. In his survey of current developments in the volume under review Christopher Saunders observes that 'much of the best work on South African history continues to be done outside the country' (290). Typically *History Making and Present Day Politics* is a project of the Swedish Nordic Africa Institute, edited by Hans Erik Stolten on the basis of his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Copenhagen. Of the seventeen contributors more than half are not based in South Africa. Another notable feature is the relative lack of historiographical self-reflection. Saunders points out that there are only two book-length surveys of South African historiography in English (280). He also observes that 'few historians have commented on [the TRC Report], let alone subjected [it] to any detailed critique' (290).

For these reasons, among others, a volume setting out 'to make a transnational attempt to renew the debate about the most important concepts in South African historiography' (8) from the vantage point of the new post-apartheid South Africa offers a welcome and overdue opportunity. However, it soon appears that the book actually has two distinct and not readily compatible objectives – and that a good part of it gets sidetracked into a third area of a quite different kind. One stated

2 A. Bank, 'The Great Debate and the Origins of South African Historiography', *Journal of African History*, 38, 1997, 261-287.

3 S. Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 54.

objective is to provide inclusive reflections on the field as a whole: 'we have tried to make room for divergent views and temperaments to give a broad and inclusive picture of South African historiography' (27). Actually, though, the main focus of the book is much narrower and more specific; it is primarily concerned with the fate of the radical or revisionist historical scholarship that came into prominence during the 1970s and 1980s. This second and operative objective is entirely different in scope (it is unconcerned with South Africa's pre-modern history and has little interest in its archaeological, anthropological, cultural, intellectual or educational aspects) and is based on different theoretical assumptions (including a hierarchical schema of historical knowledge informed by a particular 'progressive' master narrative). But if these are the ambitious commitments that animated the project, then a good part of the eventual contributions ended up dealing with a different kind of subject matter altogether, that of the cottage industry of 'heritage studies' which has sprung up over the past decade or so. This anomaly is not explained or justified except by some vague references to heritage as 'a form of public history' (Baines, 170) or the contention that popular heritage projects are one of the areas in which history in South Africa is 'very much alive' (31). Such statements also reflect a confusing notion that somehow the very practice of history in South Africa, broadly conceived, is in a state of 'crisis'. What is at stake, rather, is the crisis of radical historical scholarship in the context of post-apartheid South Africa.

It has to be said at the outset then that, taken as a whole, this volume is both incoherent and also does not deliver in terms of its stated objectives. So far from giving a broad and inclusive picture of post-apartheid South African historiographical developments, there is little or no mention of a diverse range of significant and innovative historical scholarship. Current South African historiography, in an inclusive sense, has in fact been quite productive on a number of different fronts, though one would not gather that from this volume. To mention only a few of the most striking absences: new work on the nature of the 'archive' in relation to both documented and oral history,[4] Jean and John Comaroff's anthropological history of the nineteenth-century missionary project,[5] Charles van Onselen's major new works in social history,[6] the debates on the Mfecane and its aftermath,[7] the Xhosa Cattle Killing Movement and its afterlives,[8] Hermann Giliomee's work on

4 See, e.g., Carolyn Hamilton et al, eds, *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002); also Pippa Skotnes, ed., *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1996); L. Vail & L. White, *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History* (London: James Currey, 1991); E.R.Sienaert et al, eds, *Oral Tradition and Innovation: New Wine in Old Bottles?* (Durban: University of Natal Oral Documentation and Research Centre, 1991); Isabel Hofmeyr, *'We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told': Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1993).

5 Jean & John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution Vol. 1: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa; Vol. 2: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

6 C. van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996); *The Fox and the Flies: The World of Joseph Silver, Racketeer and Psychopath* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).

7 C. Hamilton, ed., *The Mfecane Aftermath: Reconstructive Debates in Southern African History* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995); N. Etherington, *The Great Treks: The Transformation of South Africa, 1815-1854* (London: Longman, 2001).

8 J. Wentzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy and Beyond* (Scottsville: UKZN Press, 2009).

Afrikaner nationalism,[9] major new work on slavery,[10] the frontier,[11] imperial rule and colonial encounters,[12] Christian missions,[13] the intellectual history of colonial scholarship,[14] critical explorations of historical representations,[15] biographies as a mode of historical scholarship,[16] the role of intellectuals in the contexts of segregation and apartheid,[17] the history of racism and the origins of apartheid,[18] the origins and history of Bantu Education,[19] emerging new sub-fields in medical and institutional history,[20] and so on. It reflects a rather peculiar conception of historical scholarship, and of 'history making' more generally, to bypass all of these recent publications and instead give prominence to 'heritage studies' (including such projects as that of the 'Lost City' or the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town) while at the same time effectively ignoring such a major public effort in 'dealing with the past' as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process.

Moreover, the actual contributions to this volume are of uneven quality and varying interest: there are a number of significant chapters by prominent professional historians (in particular those by Saul Dubow, Colin Bundy, Christopher Saunders and Albert Grundlingh) next to articles by younger researchers reporting, with mixed success, on their doctoral or post-doctoral projects; some of the participants (e.g. Bernard Magubane, Merle Lipton) are more concerned to revisit former polemical and ideological battlegrounds while others (such as Martin Legassick

9 H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003).

10 R.C-H. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society of the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994); E. Eldredge & F. Morton, eds, *Slavery in South Africa: Captive Labor and the Dutch Frontier* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1994).

11 N. Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist and Khoisan on the Cape Northern Frontier in the 18th Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005); S. Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Cape Eastern Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); J. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989); C.C. Crais, *The Politics of Evil: Magic, State Power and the Political Imagination in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

12 A. Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-century South Africa and Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001); R. Price, *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

13 D. Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in South Africa* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1996); E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (Montreal: McGill/Queen's University Press, 2002); R. Elphick & R. Davenport, eds, *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997).

14 R. Thornton, *Capture by Description: Writing Ethnography in South Africa, 1845-1900* 9 (Cape Town, 1989); S. Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2006); A. Bank, *Bushmen in a Victorian World: The Remarkable Story of the Bleek-Lloyd Collection of Bushmen Folklore* (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2006); P. Harries, *Butterflies and Barbarian: Swiss Missionaries and Systems of Knowledge in South-East Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007).

15 C.C. Crais and P. Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009); P. Lalu, *The Deaths of Hintsa: Postapartheid South Africa and the Shape of Recurring Pasts* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2009).

16 R. Mendelsohn, *Sammy Marks: The Uncrowned King of the Transvaal* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1991); C. Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cape Town: David Philip. 1998); J. Guy, *The View Across the River: Harriette Colenso and the Zulu Struggle Against Imperialism* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2001); J. Hyslop, *The Notorious Syndicalist. J.T. Bain: A Scottish Rebel in Colonial South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2004).

17 P. Rich, *Hope and Despair: English-speaking Intellectuals and South African Politics* (London: British Academic Press, 1993); M. Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

18 S. Dubow, *Illicit Union: Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); D. Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1963* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); J. Lazar, *Verwoerd versus the Visionaries: The South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (Sabra) and Apartheid, 1948-1961* (Braamfontein: Witwatersrand University Press, 1993); K. Breckenridge, 'Verwoerd's Bureau of Proof: Total Information in the Making of Apartheid', *History Workshop Journal*, 59, 2005, 83-108.

19 C. Kros, *Economic, Political and Intellectual Origins of Bantu Education, 1926-1951* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 1996); Peter Kallaway, ed., *The History of Education under Apartheid, 1948-1994* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 2002).

20 S. Marks, *Divided Sisterhood: Race, Class and Gender in the South African Nursing Profession* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994); A. Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (London: Tauris, 1996).

and Catherine Burns) have moved on and are content to provide personal report cards on current projects and involvements; some contributors (Martin Murray, Gary Baines) adopt a generalised and quasi-theoretical 'cultural studies' approach long on invocations of Habermas, Derrida and Foucault and quick on broad-gauge global comparative tendencies but short on the specifics of South African developments; at the other extreme Alison Drew develops a closely argued and fine-grained case disputing the particular historical 'fact' that the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) ever used the slogan 'white workers of the world unite' in the context of the 1922 Rand Revolt.

All of this is a pity in so far as it detracts from the significance of what was the original main topic of the volume, i.e. the unexpected demise of the radical or revisionist approach in recent South African historiography, for that is an important and intriguing matter. The ironic fate of radical historical scholarship in post-apartheid South Africa indeed raises issues of considerable importance and has general relevance transcending parochial concerns. Radical historical scholarship, informed by different varieties of neo-Marxist commitment, had been a highly influential but also much contested development that transformed the study of South African history and society from the late 1960s. As an oppositional strategy it operated at one remove. While the new generation of radical historians of course rejected the apartheid order and saw their scholarly work as part of the broad anti-apartheid struggle, their immediate target was not the official version of South African history espoused by Afrikaner nationalist historians but rather the liberal orthodoxy prevailing in the scholarly world itself. The radicals brought about a series of paradigm shifts: they substituted class for race as basic explanatory category; they sought the origins of apartheid not in racial attitudes inherited from the era of pre-modern frontier conflict but in the exploitation of migrant labour on the diamond and gold mines, commercial farms and industry of modern South Africa; they argued that apartheid was not an 'irrational' and 'dysfunctional' anomaly obstructing the course of capitalist progress, as liberal historians assumed and maintained, but that it actually amounted to a highly functional form of racial capitalism. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s the revisionist agenda of the radical historians, and the concomitant 'race and class' debates, invigorated and transformed not only South African historical scholarship but the humanities and social studies more generally. Colin Bundy, a leading radical historian himself, observes that '"radical" or "revisionist" historical scholarship had become the most influential body of work shaping the understanding of the South African past' (73). Christopher Saunders, a liberal historian of the same generation, concurs: 'By the 1980s history was widely seen as the leading discipline in the humanities, thanks largely to the radical historians' (284). The appeal of the radical historians went beyond the scholarly merits of their work as such, impressive and diverse as much of this undoubtedly was, but was also due to the apparent social and political relevance of that work. During a critical period of South African history, as apartheid oppression deepened and a revolutionary situation seemed to be in the making, the radical historians were developing what seemed like a plausible model of *praxis* for progressive scholarship. Bundy cites Norman Etherington, an Australian-based historian, in this regard: 'History in the 1970s and 1980s became the master tool of

intellectual resistance to apartheid' (73). Harold Wolpe, a seminal radical theorist, spoke of 'the use of history to sustain progressive movements in favour of social reforms' (41). The primary concern of this volume is with radical historical scholarship as the embodiment of 'a practice that can enable a constructive combination of scholarly work and political engagement' (38). For a time, during the 1970s and 1980s, it appeared that the revisionist historians were on the way to achieving this model combination of radical scholarly work and political engagement.

From this perspective what happened next was entirely unexpected and deeply ironic. What happened next, of course, was the defeat of apartheid and the 'miracle' of the negotiated transition to a post-apartheid democratic South Africa under ANC rule. On all counts the radical historians appeared to be strategically well positioned for this turn of events and it could have been expected that, more generally, the transition to a 'new' South Africa would provide a context in which revisionist scholarship and other forms of radical 'history-making' could flourish. In actuality, precisely the opposite came about. Even if historical scholarship on South Africa broadly conceived continued, as we saw above, to be an active and diversely productive field, the radical approach to the practice of history in South Africa entered into a state of crisis in a number of different and inter-related ways in the course of the next decade. To begin with, some activist-scholars who had been fashioned through the critical practice of struggle history had to make an uneasy and often frustrating transition to the very different enterprise of working as policy advisers for the new democratic state and its incipient bureaucracy.[21] The more so when the political orientation and policy direction of that new democratic state took on a quite different complexion from what radical intellectuals had anticipated. In Bundy's words, 'the political project of the new government shifted quite rapidly in a direction that perplexed and discomfited left-of-centre academics' (77).

Such political disappointments of radical expectations in times of change are, of course, by no means unique to the South African transition, and some might even have predicted something of the kind. But what could hardly have been predicted was what happened to the public role of 'history' in the new post-apartheid South Africa. Going on past precedents it could well have been expected that the transition to majority rule would open up new perspectives on, and greater public interest in, South African history in an African context. At least, that is what had happened during the immediate post-independence era in Africa. From the 1960s there had been significant new developments in African history ranging from the ideological contestations of the different Dar es Salaam and Ibadan schools to new approaches in oral history. Nothing like this happened in the South African case. Saunders observes that 'the transfer of power in South Africa in the 1990s was not accompanied by any major new trend in historical writing' (286). On the contrary, the 'new' post-apartheid South Africa was marked by a wholesale turning away from 'history' and what that meant or might mean (except in the form of commercialised heritage projects aimed at boosting the tourist market). Stolten

21 J. Muller & N. Cloete, 'To Outwit Modernity: Intellectuals and Politics in Transition', *Transformation*, 14, 1991, 24-41.

recalls that Nelson Mandela himself on occasion actually called on South Africans to 'forget the past' (42). (In this regard the TRC process proved to be the exception, not the rule.) For the institutionalised study and teaching of history in South Africa this soon produced a major crisis. At university level enrolments in history departments rapidly declined as students moved to the commerce faculties or sought professional qualifications giving access to the globalising world abroad. This coincided with the belated impact of the 'managerial revolution' in South African higher education and its associated manifestations of increasing market orientation, cost-cutting and re-direction of resources in the name of efficiency and affordability. In this perspective the study of history was no longer accepted as a necessity but instead appeared as an eminently dispensable luxury. Within a short space of time history departments suddenly found themselves under threat and having a hard time to justify their very existence. In Bundy's words, 'the 1990s saw history as a field of study increasingly unable to attract students, teachers, or institutional resources … History departments were renamed, restructured and down-sized' (75).

Even more ominously, history all but lost its established role and significance as a teaching subject in secondary education. As part of the comprehensive transformation of the national education system, the new ANC government introduced an ambitious and sophisticated template for progressive pedagogy in the form of 'outcomes-based education'. Amongst others this entailed a radical restructuring of the school syllabus which effectively removed history as a separate subject of study. Again in Bundy's words, 'Curriculum 2005, promulgated in 1996, defining the compulsory school syllabus for the next decade … removed all reference to history from the curriculum: its rigid mode of "outcomes-based education" was patently inimical to any considered evaluation of the past' (76). At one blow this threatened to destroy both the institutional foundations of history as a field of study (if history no longer functioned as a core school subject there would be no special need to train teachers in history, and university departments would lose a major part of their student constituency) and the general historical education of coming generations. Alarmed by these prospects a delegation of professional historians sought to intercede with the ANC Ministry of Education. If the radical historians among them thought that their own work over the previous decades had done something to establish the value and relevance of history to the new post-apartheid dispensation, they were disabused. A few years later a new and more enlightened Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, with some claims to be a progressive intellectual himself, gave them more of a hearing and established a Ministerial Committee with representation for university historians while also launching an official South African History Project. In time the school curriculum was revised so as to restore some of the lost ground to the study of history (142, 176). Even so Colin Bundy's assessment of the state of history in the new South Africa remains bleak: 'The institutional base of historians was weakened, their professional status and social function questioned, and their epistemological foundations gave way underfoot … All these insecurities were intensified by a fundamental uncertainty as to their audience, their script or their role in the drama of the post-apartheid 1990s' (94). In short, the radical historians' confident model of *praxis* for progressive

scholarship had inexplicably come apart in the 'new' post-apartheid South Africa and they found themselves faced with nothing less than a crisis of survival.

One may well expect that in a volume in which this dramatic and ironic fate of radical historical scholarship in the context of the South African transition to post-apartheid is the primary topic, there would be serious reflections on the origins and possible explanations of this crisis, and maybe some critical questioning of the feasibility of the basic model of *praxis* for progressive scholarship itself. Indeed, in his introduction the editor observes that 'the time may have come for South Africans to take another look at the images and myths of their era of repression in the new light of the fact that their liberation has turned out to be more of a neo-liberal victory than the national democratic revolution that many had expected' (10). But significantly this refers to the radicals' political disappointments in the nature of the South African transition only, and not to the genealogy or validity of their own project of radical historical scholarship itself. In general a marked feature of the accounts of 'history making' provided in this volume is the lack of self-reflexivity and the little interest shown in the underlying history of their own intellectual trajectories. By and large we are presented with merely descriptive accounts of the passage from the time when the debates between liberal and radical historians were at the core of South African intellectual and political life to the crisis of survival when the study of history is unexpectedly sidelined in post-apartheid South Africa. In so far as any attempts at explanation for this turn of events are provided, these refer to external and contextual factors, not to any intrinsic feature of radical historical scholarship or its model of progressive *praxis*. Colin Bundy comes closest to facing up to the 'intellectual crisis' posed to history as a scholarly pursuit for radical historians, noting that history was particularly vulnerable to the postmodernist 'textual turn': 'In South Africa, as elsewhere, many historians were unnerved by the theoretical challenges to the validity of their subject' (78-79). But instead of exploring these 'theoretical challenges' to the radical historians' own intellectual project Bundy then changes tack and, 'in lieu of a conclusion', offers some reflections on the political problems of nation-building and the potential function of 'model [historical] textbooks' in that regard (79-97). The 'theoretical challenges' remain unaddressed.

The most telling illustration of this tendency is provided by Martin Legassick's chapter on his experiences of practising 'applied history' in post-1994 South Africa. Legassick had been one of the leading figures among the revisionist historians, whose seminal paper on 'The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography' of 1971[22] first helped to define the radical critique of the liberal orthodoxy. Exile-based, he combined scholarly work with radical activism, only to be expelled from the ANC along with other left-dissidents in the early 1980s. After 1994 he returned to take up an academic position as Professor of History at the University of the Western Cape. But his priority very much remained that of *praxis* or, in his terms, of practising 'applied history'. Legassick's chapter recounts in some detail what this involved in terms of a series of specific projects over the next decade:

22 M. Legassick, 'The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography' in S. Marks & A. Atmore, eds., *Economy and Society in Pre-industrial South Africa* (London: Longman, 1980), 44-79.

applying his research expertise in aid of the historical claims to land restitution of the September family in Upington as well as those by the victims of the forced removals in the Keidebeest and Blikkies townships, advising on the post-apartheid transformation of the McGregor Museum, doing extensive research commissioned by the Land Commission on Cape Town's infamous forced removals in District Six in preparation for the long-delayed restitution process, similar research related to the African Tenants Project on the Cape Flats, etc. At one level this is all wholly admirable, an impressive example of public-spiritedness and scholarly expertise put in the service of disadvantaged individuals and marginalised communities. But it falls a long way short of the radical model of progressive *praxis*. Legassick himself stresses the 'accidental' ways in which he became involved in several of the projects as well as their inconclusive and frustrating nature: '"Applied history" of this kind was beginning to get me down' (137; cf 132, 133, 134). He expresses regret that he was unable to link his oral history research with archive-based history; more generally he does not claim to have made any substantial contributions to historical scholarship but notes that it did have some consequences for museum staff and attracted 'quite a lot of press attention' at the time (134).

Perhaps the most telling vignette concerns the account of his involvement in the abortive District Six restitution process. Legassick starts with a reference to a moving ceremony in November 2000, attended by hundreds of former residents and their families, when President Thabo Mbeki presided over the formal handing back of the land in District Six to its occupants, forcibly removed by the apartheid regime some 30 years previously. Noting that the restitution process for District Six had been stalled, he observes that 'it was in fact research conducted by a team at UWC, directed by myself, which broke the logjam and enabled the ceremony to take place' (136). In this important case at least, then, it appeared that the radical model of 'applied history' had been vindicated in practice. However, from his further account it then transpires that this meeting had in fact been stage-managed by the ANC shortly before local elections in Cape Town. Indeed, Legassick's account of this episode concludes that 'although this research was completed in August 2000, and despite the "handing over" ceremony in November that year, as of mid-2003 not a single tenant had moved back to District Six, nor had any houses been built though they were reported to be "in the pipeline" (137). Nor was this an exceptional case. More generally, Legassick concludes that 'progressively from the Upington, through the District Six, to the African Tenants Project I had become sucked into the administrative as opposed to the academic side of research. My mind felt drained of energy. I referred to production of sausages as in a sausage factory' (140). In one way or another all his radical experiments in 'applied history' had frustratingly become bogged down in bureaucratic obfuscation, were manipulated by politicians for short-term opportunist gains, or got drawn into the mazes of legal proceedings. At a personal level one can readily sympathise with Legassick's frustrations, but at an intellectual level this experience must surely raise more general questions as well, not least as to what all of this might say about the viability of the radical model of progressive *praxis* itself. Remarkably, though, Legassick has little or nothing to say on this count. In conclusion he does pose the question: 'What broader reflections do I have on these experiences?' This is his

response: 'All of them have taken me out of the "ivory tower" of academia into the real world of people. … In "applied history" one cannot escape the emotions that people attach to their experiences of the past' (146). And that's it! It seems the radical historian is neither interested in, nor capable of, self-critical reflection on the intellectual sources and historical conditions of this debacle of progressive *praxis*.

The particular case of Legassick's frustrated attempts at 'applied history', and more generally of the crisis faced by radical historians in post-apartheid South Africa, must of course be properly contextualised. No doubt a significant part of that wider intellectual and political context will involve the post-1989 crisis of the (neo-)Marxist tradition in global perspective. While in the 1970s and 1980s the South African radical historians could confidently avail themselves of theoretical resources ranging from E.P. Thompson and Genovese to Gramsci and Althusser or Stuart Hall, these no longer had the same intellectual authority in the changed world after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the ideological conflicts attendant on the Cold War. But if the South African transition was in various ways intimately connected to the post-communist transitions which swept Eastern Europe, it was by no means just a distant echo or a local replication. Indeed, from a radical perspective the significance of the South African transition could plausibly be construed in opposite terms, not as a demonstration of the unfeasibility and collapse of 'actually existing socialist societies' but on the contrary as a necessary stage on the way to a 'national democratic revolution'. In popular parlance the transition to post-apartheid did not so much mark the 'end of history', but rather heralded the birth of the 'new' democratic South Africa.[23] In the South African case, at least, the radical project of 'history making' and progressive *praxis* had not been similarly closed off as for neo-Marxists in the European context.

At this point it may be relevant to consider the significance of the major silence in this volume on 'history making' in post-apartheid South Africa, that regarding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process as a national project in 'dealing with the past'. Astonishingly, in a volume of this kind, only one of the eighteen contributions deals thematically with the TRC at all, and that is probably the weakest chapter in the book. Elaine Unterhalter's discussion shows little serious interest either in the complex objectives and processes of the TRC or in its varied impact on, and significance for, South African society at the time and in the longer run. Its main point concerns the 'process of equating lifetime and historical time' in the autobiographical TRC narratives of Archbishop Tutu and poet-journalist Antjie Krog (99). For the rest Unterhalter merely observes that the TRC did not pay enough attention to gender or to social structure (99, 103, 110) and does not concern herself more specifically with the TRC as a process of 'history making' at all. (Actually the companion chapter by Anna Bohlin, while dealing with a related case study of claims to land restitution, succeeds in making more pertinent comparative observations on the different kinds of truth processes involved compared to the TRC process.) This neglect of the TRC process, if not deliberate, appears to be no accident. When the TRC is mentioned in passing, then

23 See the literature generated by F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).

this tends to be in sceptical or deprecating terms, directly or indirectly playing down its possible significance. Certainly there is no sustained effort to provide any comprehensive account or critical analysis of the TRC process. This absence is the more striking in a volume which does provide a full treatment of the centenary commemoration of the South African War (in the chapter by Albert Grundlingh) as well as an analysis of the new Apartheid Museum (by Georgi Verbeeck), not to forget the copious attention given to a whole range of 'heritage projects'. What are we to make of this apparent animus on the part of (former) radical historians towards the TRC process?

In this regard it may be instructive to compare the respective operating assumptions and objectives of the radical model of progressive *praxis* with those of the TRC's notion of dealing with past political atrocities in order to bring about post-conflict reconciliation. In the case of other professional historians there may have been some understandable resistance to the notion of amateur Commissioners venturing on to *their* terrain without the necessary professional training or qualifications in order to determine the 'truth' about the past. But for radical historians it could hardly have been the public nature of the TRC's truth-telling that was the problem. Instead, their underlying objection was against the kind of *praxis* involved in the TRC's 'dealing with the past', i.e. a human rights focus on past political atrocities in order to bring about post-conflict reconciliation rather than a progressive *praxis* committed to basic social and economic transformation. From a radical perspective the 'moral' nature of the TRC's politics of the past was essentially misconceived: truth-telling at victims' hearings could neither contribute to serious historical scholarship nor conceivably serve to sustain progressive movements in favour of social reforms. (Surprisingly, even the TRC's special sectoral hearing on the business community, in which broader issues of inequality and social justice were raised, receives no attention in this volume except from Merle Lipton in her continuing 'liberal' defence of the role of the business community under apartheid.)

Effectively the TRC process amounted to an alternative mode of dealing with the past to that espoused by the radical historians. From their perspective it was a wrong-headed challenge to the basic assumptions and commitments of their own approach. The radical model of historical scholarship in the service of progressive *praxis* sought to harness the rigorous and critical study of the past to the ends of national liberation, human emancipation and social justice. The TRC's dealing with past atrocities also had forward-looking functions but these were concerned with the different objectives of post-conflict reconciliation and restorative justice. This made it difficult, if not impossible, for radical historians to participate in the TRC process itself. But why could they not consider the TRC process as a historical phenomenon in its own right, or critically engage with it as a rival approach to the past? Perhaps things could have been different if the radical model of historical scholarship as progressive *praxis* had not encountered its own anomalous crisis of survival in the new post-apartheid South Africa at just the same time as the TRC process took centre stage in the public life of the mid-1990s. Consider the counterfactual prospect that the post-apartheid transition to majority rule might have brought to power an ANC alliance (including the labour union movement and the

Communist Party) seriously committed to the social and economic policy objectives long anticipated by radical intellectuals. On that scenario the radical historians would have been politically vindicated and might also have been established in institutional positions of influence and authority reflecting a recognised role for 'history' in South African public life and education. In that case radical historians would surely have been able to deal confidently with the TRC process in their own critical terms. But in the actual course of the post-apartheid transition a different conjuncture of events came about: the radical historians unexpectedly found the ground cut away from under their own feet just at the same time as they were confronted with the public drama of the TRC's rival way of 'dealing with the past'. As a result the radical historians were intellectually incapacitated from critically engaging with the TRC as a historical process. Giving attention to the proliferation of heritage projects posed less of a threat, even if such commercial exploitation of the past aimed at the tourist market is at the opposite extreme of the scholarly and ideological spectrum compared to the progressive model of radical historical scholarship.

A related but different issue concerns their approach to post-apartheid nation-building, both in general and more specifically in the context of the TRC process. On the evidence of their contributions to this volume, the (former) radical historians tend to have ambivalent views on the issue of post-apartheid nation-building. Some posit nation-building – and the concomitant construction of a new and inclusive master national narrative – as an essential task. Thus Colin Bundy affirms that 'in South Africa the process of shared recollection should remain an aspiration for academic historians. It is also crucial to imagining the nation' (97). In his editorial introduction Stolten cites Kader Asmal to the effect that 'memory is identity, and we cannot have a divided identity', and confirms that 'we need to build an inclusive memory where the heroes and heroines of the past belong not only to certain sectors, but to us all' (44). Others are critical of the construction of new national master narratives in so far as these silence dissenting voices and marginalise local narratives. Thus Gary Baines sees the imposition of national narratives through hegemonic projects of nation-building as a threat: 'If ordinary voices do not fit the dominant narrative, they are silenced and exit the space of public memory. Although this need not mean that they are forgotten, they most certainly are marginalized. … As the liberation struggle becomes the dominant master narrative of our national history, the stories of smaller communities are subordinated to this master narrative' (181). However, when it comes to the TRC process all parties tend to assume that it must have been involved in a particular project of post-apartheid nation-building, that associated with the 'Rainbow Nation' so notably projected by Archbishop Tutu. Thus Bundy identifies three over-arching attempts to narrate the new nation in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, i.e. the 'Rainbow Nation' of the TRC next to Mbeki's 'African Renaissance' and different variations of ethnic particularism and civic nationalism (79-85). For Baines as well, 'the TRC has been the most public attempt to refashion a collective, national memory for the sake of reconciliation and laying to rest the beast of the past' (175). But we find no serious efforts to investigate to what extent, or in what sense, the TRC process actually did involve a sustained project of post-apartheid nation-building or the construction of

a new master narrative of the nation. Certainly Tutu's rhetoric of the 'Rainbow Nation' did play a prominent part at the outset of the TRC process (cast in a distinctive quasi-religious discourse of individual and collective healing and reconciliation). Certainly, too, the testimonies given to the Commission's victims hearings were effectively framed in terms of the need for personal and national reconciliation. But the official TRC Report conspicuously did *not* produce a new master narrative of the nation; indeed, a notable feature of that Report was the extent to which it avoided any overall narrative framework in order to focus on the multiplicity of specific cases and trends. This raises important and interesting questions concerning the TRC's role in what Baines refers to as 'the failure to construct a new master national narrative in post-apartheid South Africa' (174) – should this be construed as a failure attributable to the TRC (in that the TRC attempted as much, but failed), or should it rather be regarded as a consequence of the TRC process (in that the TRC did *not* engage in any sustained attempt at nation-building after all)? And in either case, how should this failure in post-apartheid nation-building and the construction of a new master narrative of the nation be assessed? These are complex questions which will require a close and critical investigation of the TRC process as a historical phenomenon in the changing post-apartheid context. But that is just what is wholly missing in these contributions; disappointingly, they do not engage either with the TRC or with post-apartheid nation-building as *historical* phenomena.

There is one significant exception to this among the contributions to this volume. In his opening chapter on 'Thoughts on South Africa: Some Preliminary Ideas' Saul Dubow begins to problematise the history of the South African 'nation' in important ways. Rather than simply assuming the project of nation-building as a given, he raises some fundamental questions about the intellectual history of this notion and its unexamined assumptions in the South African context. Dubow points out that the very term 'South Africa' only became current from the 1830s and that the modern idea of South Africa acquired its meaning only by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Given these facts, he observes, 'it is remarkable that South Africa has so often been analysed as a unitary category; the presumption that all its peoples were and are South Africans has likewise been taken for granted' (53). In particular it must be a major question of intellectual and political history at what point, and how, Africans began to conceive of themselves as 'South Africans'. But astoundingly the key historical question of when blacks began to see themselves as South Africans has remained unexplored: 'The question of how Africans saw themselves as South Africans or, indeed, how they viewed white claimants to that status, has scarcely been addressed' (57). And so Dubow concludes that, if nation-building continues to be a contested matter in post-apartheid South Africa, then historians' role must first be to critically explore the prior history of South African nation-building: 'It is surely time, therefore, for historians to formulate detailed questions about how South Africa has been conceived and imagined, to analyse the different forms in which ideas about South Africa and South African societies have developed over time. And to trace the ways in which the South African "problem" or predicament has been conceptualized' (72). With this Dubow is opening up some of the underlying critical questions of the intellectual history of South

African historiography not unconnected to the crisis of survival in which radical historical scholarship unexpectedly found itself in the 1990s.

The absence of any such critical self-questioning of their own intellectual history by the radical historians in the rest of this volume indicates that we should not expect a major revival of radical historical scholarship in the South African context any time soon. In the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel famously observed that historical insight necessarily follows on political *praxis*:

> One more word about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it. When philosophy paints its gray in gray, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's gray in gray it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.[24]

Marx equally famously inverted this with his affirmation of the unity of theory and practice, not as backward-looking reflection but as progressive praxis: 'What matters is *not to understand the world but to change it*.'[25] It is this model of progressive *praxis* that fundamentally still informed the self-understanding of the radical historians and for a while seemed to place them in pole position on the eve of the expected radical change to a post-apartheid South Africa. But when this transition to a post-apartheid South Africa did come about, the radical historians unexpectedly found themselves blind-sided, not only deprived of the future they had anticipated but also unable to understand the historical origins of their own present. So far from having taken flight, in their case the owl of Minerva still needs to spread its wings yet again.

24 G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*.
25 Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto*.