

CONFERENCE 2010
KEYNOTE ADDRESS
THE USES OF HISTORY

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“The past once destroyed never returns. Its destruction is perhaps the greatest of all crimes.” (Simone Weil)

As historians and teachers of history we tend to associate history with three positive things. The first is that history offers us a sense of where we have come from and what our heritage is. The great Polish-born Oxford philosopher, Lezek Kolakowski has formulated it best: “We learn history not in order to know how to behave or how to succeed, but to know who we are.”¹ It also gives us a guide to understanding our place in society and the forces that shape a society.

The second is that history provides us with truths about the past from which to draw lessons for today, and even to devise policies for dealing with intractable problems. A corollary of this is the view that communities that do not heed the lessons of history are bound to repeat their past mistakes or crimes.

The third, closely related to the other two, is that a deep understanding of the past enables us to sense the political direction a society is taking and the future that awaits it.

To briefly summarise the three claims:

- History tells us who we are and where we have come from
- Through the of history we can teach learners and students to become good citizens and assist politicians to become good policies

¹ *The Economist*, 1 August 2009, p. 72.

- With a good grasp of history we can anticipate the future

Anticipating the future

Let us start with the third proposition -- that historians can anticipate future developments particularly well. This can only be accepted on the condition that we grasp the fact that it is only exceptional historians that sometimes have glimpses of the true of nature of historical change.

I would like to explain this by quoting from one of my favourite Big History Books, as I call them. It is the work of JM Robbins *The Pelican History of the World* (1976) that deals with the beginning of civilization three millennia ago until the Cold War in the 1960s.

At the end of the day the only advantage of being a historian is that one may be a little less surprised by the outcome, whatever it is. Only two general truths appear from the study of history. One is that things tend to change much more, and more quickly than one might think. The other is that they tend to change much less, and much more slowly, than one may think. Both truths tend to be exemplified by any specific historical situation, and so, for good or ill, we shall always find what happens somewhat surprising.²

The claim that Robbins is making for history is very modest –as it should be. It comes down to this: the study of history prepares us for a state of mind in which we are too surprised by unexpected developments. While a modest claim, it is one not to be sniffed at.

No historian or political scientist that I know of anticipated the hugest developments of our lifetime, namely the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the rapid disintegration of the Soviet empire and the abrupt end of the Cold War.

It is not as if there is something wrong with historians. Virtually no economist predicted the sudden financial crisis that hit the Western world in 2007, although there were numerous red lights flicking from approximately 2001 about the sub prime housing loans particularly in the United States.

In a lecture to the London School of Economics in 2008 Queen Elizabeth in 2008 asked a group of economists this question: “How could you miss the financial crisis that would hit the banks and the insurance companies due to bad debts? It was so huge.” The economists’ written reply was far from convincing.

2 JM Robbins, *The Pelican History of the World* (London, Penguin Books, 1976), p. 1076.

In South Africa virtually no one predicted the rapid disintegration of apartheid and National Party rule, and of the NP itself.. If someone ask me why no historian predicted it my reply is that it would not have happened without the Fall of the Wall. If the Wall did not topple, a diluted form of white supremacy may well have lasted ten of fifteen years longer.

It is instructive to note that, for all the talk that South Africans themselves decided on their political destiny, all the big political realignments of twentieth century were the result of unexpected developments in Europe: the outbreak of the First World War, leading to the National Party taking power ten years later, the outbreak of the Second World War that paved the way for the NP assuming power nine years later and the end of the Cold War, which led to the African National Congress coming to office six years later.

Yet I do believe that gifted historians working on a very big canvass, like the history of the world, or a “civilization” or a country, can discern some broad truths about the past. When J.M. Robbins, cited above, wrote in the 1960s and early 1970s he could already see the world economy was experiencing a fundamental shift from the developed to the developing world, and that accelerating technological change outpaced the capacity of the human race to produce answers to the ethical challenges some of them brought in their wake.³

In his *A Study of History* the historian Arnold Toynbee tried to establish common patterns, and even laws in the rise, flowering and decay of 26 civilizations since the beginning of recorded history. In 1949 the magazine put his photograph on its cover as its “Man of the Year”. His work was regarded almost in a same spirit of awe. That is no longer the case,

Yet Toynbee once made a comment that showed what value lies in what one can call the long view. In 1952 he responded to a letter to an Afrikaner intellectual who asked him what are the challenges confronting the Afrikaners, who a few years before had voted in the National Party with its radical programme of apartheid. I quote Toynbee’s reply at some length:⁴

My personal feeling is that the Afrikaner nation is confronted with a most difficult and at the same time most important spiritual task, which it is bound to undertake, without having any choice of refusing.

It seems to me that, in South Africa, you are faced already with a situation that is going very soon to be the common situation of the whole world as a

³ JM Robbins, *History of the World*, p.1018.

⁴ P Meyer, *Nog nie ver genoeg nie*, pp. 64-65.

result of 'the annihilation of distance' through the progress of our Western technology... There will never again be room in the world for the different fractions of mankind to retire into isolation from one another again.

Now, in South Africa, the accident of history has put the native, coloured and white people of the country into this difficult situation at an early date: so history — or god — has given you the honourable mission of being the spiritual pioneers in trying to find the solution of a spiritual problem that is soon going to face the rest of the human race as well.

What a term pregnant with meaning is “annihilation of distance” ! Apartheid was in many ways an attempt to prevent the annihilation of distance —the streaming to the cities and towns of poor black and coloured people, their entry into the labour market, their movement up on the labour ladder and into the so-called grey residential areas, the integration of universities, schools and organised sport.

Apartheid crumbled because of what John Kane-Berman called the Silent Revolution —the inexorable breaking down of almost all forms of racial exclusivity in the urban setting.

To get children and students to become absorbed in reading or studying history, it is always good policy to discard the obsession with dates and laws, and get them to understand the underlying process that shape the political context and forge the future.

One of the main keys to the understanding historical processes is to be found in concrete figures, or to call it by its more precise name, demography . “Demography is destiny”. So said a French scholar August Comte nearly two centuries ago, sum up one of the most basic facts of the social processes that shape the future.

When the South African government began implementing apartheid in the early 1950s the whites formed just under 20 percent of the population. That proportion shrank in little more than 50 years to 9 per cent. Apartheid collapsed because of demographic pressure but also because the shrinking white base was unable to provide all the necessary skills.

After 1975 the lack of skills began to strangle the economy.

The historian CFJ Muller, editor of the general history of South Africa called *500 years* published in 1969, also anticipated the political upheaval that the country would experience by the end of the century. He wrote in a remarkably prescient statement that despite the apparent strength of the whites, their lack

of numbers meant that that they would not in any way be assured by the year 2000 they would still be in a white government in a black continent.⁵

In many ways South Africa's social evolution after the mid-1950s preceded that of the world today. The world's thirty high-income countries are home to only a sixth of the world population but these countries are responsible for five-sixth of the production. In most of these countries the birth rate is below replacement level. Nearly 90 per cent of the increase of the world's population presently takes place in the developing countries.

There is an unprecedented push from the so-called Third world to the First World. It will have profound political consequences. There is great political pressure on the parties to stop immigration and deny immigrants the vote. It is like trying to plug a leaking wall with your finger.

By 1980 whites in South Africa, who controlled all the factors of production, also formed approximately 15% of the total population. Their birth rate also plummeted to below replacement rate. The highest birth rates occurred in the "Bantustans" where people were poorest.

Toynbee's annihilation of distance in Europe will not occur as fast as in South Africa, but is increasing every day. A good grasp of history, particularly South African history will help develop a sense that the present order of things is transient: societies do change, sometimes unexpectedly fast, and sometimes painfully slow. Good teachers can alert the children to the possibilities of what a book half a century ago called "Future Shock."

History as a grounding for citizenship and policy-making

It is possible for school history to supplement and re-enforce a sense of personal and national identity in countries who are not too big or too powerful, or where the upper class ceded its privileges long ago. The problem starts when history is used to defend the power or wealth of a country, class or an ethnic group. Almost always there is challenge that seeks to overthrow the claims of the powerful. Such nations are wounded nations.

It is in wounded nations that the powerful steal the history of those without power.

⁵ Cited by A Grundlingh, History on the Hill: Aspects of scholarship and scholarly life at the Unisa History Department, 1968 – 2000, *Kleio*, 38, 2, 12006, p. 130.

In power the Afrikaner nationalists projected the key concepts of their history onto the history of other communities. In the present era there is an attempt to depict the whites as merely fringe figures on a scene dominated by blacks and by the ANC in particular. I hear that in draft syllabus a government department is circulating here is a ridiculous attempt to describe the Great Trek as a “white *difaqane*” and to turn the military battles between the Boer Republics and British army as a sideshow of the blacks that fought and suffered in the war.

But it is not only wounded nations that suffer from this malaise. A study of the American school and university textbooks reveals that history is constantly being rewritten to suit the last pedagogical fads and the dominant political groups. The purpose was not so much to inform as to manipulate children. The author concluded: “Small wonder American school children often find history boring and valueless.”⁶

History in the service of the powerful is invariably challenged by radicals whose main aim is to belittle or ridicule their achievements. But this effort often goes too far and indeed may become destructive or disruptive by failing to give recognition to what the system had built up

Tony Judt, one of the most thought-provoking historians of recent times, remarked on this:

The historian’s task is not to the disrupt to for the sake of it but it is to tell what is almost always an uncomfortable story en explain why the discomfort is part of the truth we need to have and to live properly. A well organized society is one know the truth about itself and not one in which we tell pleasant lies about ourselves. History can show you that there was only one pile of bad stuff after another. It can also show you that there has been tremendous progress in knowledge, behaviour, laws, and civilization. But it cannot show you there was a meaning behind it all.

In editing a history of South Africa four years ago I saw my challenge as that of putting our past together in such a way that all communities could identify with the history and take pride in their role. Here are some of the main themes in the *New History of South Africa/Nuwe Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika* (Tafelberg 2007).

⁶ F Fitzgerald, *America Revised* (Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1979).

We are all out of Africa and we may in fact all be “inkommers” in South Africa

I have concluded that while most of the future of South Africa is certain –it is and will remain black-- its past has become radically uncertain. Over the past fifteen years the greatest advances in our knowledge about man in South Africa have been the archaeological insights on the transition from the Stone to the Iron Age and the revelations that the entire mankind are descendants from African people.

When the manuscript of *New History of South Africa*, which I co-edited, was ready but still lacked a name I was tempted to call it “A History of South Africa: From Eva to Zuma”. By Eva I don’t mean the Khoikhoi lady at the Cape who stayed in Van Riebeeck’s castle but the African Eve, a person living 200 000 years ago who could be considered our collective ancestor.

The most irate letter I got from a contributor was one from an archaeologist who was angry that I set aside only 4 000 words for the Iron Age -- this while Tom Lodge got only 700 words for his short biography of the great Nelson Mandela.

Seven decades ago we thought of the history of South Africa as spanning three hundred years. Then some historians from Unisa thought they would do a really brave thing and publish a history with the title *Vyfhonderd Jaar Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*. They were upstaged by the *Oxford History of South Africa* which took it back to 2 000 years ago.

As it turned out the editors of *OHSA* were far too conservative. Some dramatic findings have been made during the past ten to fifteen years about the prehistory of mankind and the central part of Africa in that history. We now know that all of mankind happens to be “out of Africa’ in a very literal sense of the word.

Let me take you through a quick chronology

- *200 000 years ago:* In the present literature the African Eve hypothesis holds sway. It states that DNA types found presently in our global human population can be traced back to a single ancestor, the African Eve, who lived some 200 000 years ago on this continent.
- *100 000 years ago:* Creatures that looked like us roamed around in Africa.
- *50 000 years ago:* Language emerged in Africa.
- *Also some 50 000 years ago:* A small group of Africans, initially probably as few

as 150, left East Africa and populated the rest of the world

- *Some 35 000 years ago:* The African migrants displaced and wiped out the only other modern human species, the Neanderthals.
- *Some 25 000 years ago:* Some racial variations between modern Africans and modern Europeans began to appear. But a 36 000 years old fossil of a modern human found recently in the Karoo did not look like modern Africans, or modern Europeans or modern Khoisan people.
- *Some 2000 years ago:* The Khoisan migrated into what is today South Africa; at about the same time, the first Iron Age Bantu-speaking peoples settled south of the Limpopo and moved rapidly into the eastern half of the country. They were settled in KwaZulu-Natal by 400 AD and the Eastern Cape by 600 AD.
- *Three and fifty hundred years ago:* Some of the descendants of those who left for Europe thirty or forty thousand years earlier returned to South Africa.

In Afrikaans there is the word *inkommers* –those who have moved in. White, black, brown, yellow – all who live in this land – are *inkommers*. Some came in early, like the Khoikhoi and Bantu-speakers and others 17 or 18 centuries later, which is an eyewink in the history of humanity in Africa. The only exceptions are those who are “pure” Bushmen and there cannot be many of them.

We have come a long way very fast. *We are all part of a land that has seen great tragedies but also great triumphs. The history I have edited does not have an unifying theme like the struggle against oppression and injustice (Readers Digest History of South Africa)) Still I think there may be something of a common theme: the realization of the different peoples that no one living could survive on its own and at the expense of others. Enslaving others also enslaved the owner.*

It has not been a bed of roses for most. As late as 1941 CW de Kiewiet remarked the South Africa is essentially a country with poor land, poor gold and poor people (He meant poorly educated people, white and black but by far the most people, apart from a small upper stratum in the white community, were in fact poor) As the Alec Guinness character in the movie Dr Zhivago said “We have come a very long way very fast”

In 1949, the elderly Jan Smuts, recently defeated in a momentous election, observed: “The whole world is moving into a Colour phase of history, with results none can foresee and South Africa should dread most. Still, the worst, like the best, never happens [in South Africa]”.

This ignores some of the cruellest episodes in South African history – the extermination of the Bushmen, the subjugation of the Xhosa and their national suicide, the suffering of migrant workers on the mines and the deaths of women and children in concentration camps during the South African war. During the 1930s and 1940s the slums in the South African cities were among the worst in the world. Apartheid destroyed many tight communities and closed off career chances.

The worst did not happen in the 1980s and 1990s. The feared blood bath did not occur in the transition from white to black rule. South Africans proved to be resilient and innovative. Urbanisation, better health care, the provision of mass education and a narrowing racial gap in education have produced a proliferation of skills across the colour spectrum.

We tend to magnify our failures and miss the magnitude of our successes

If someone from Mars were to land here without any clue about our history and start reading our newspapers and magazines she would probably conclude that some major setback occurred here in the first half of the twentieth century, followed by an unmitigated disaster in the second half. She would think that the state that was transferred in 1994 fell out of the air, that development of the economy and the infrastructure had been in the doldrums since 1910. She would probably believe that in terms of some key economic indicators South Africa between 1948 and 1994 slumped thirty of forty places in the world league.

Such a dramatic decline can indeed happen to countries. Argentina between the 1930s and 1990's slumped in terms of per capita income from a place in the top ten in the world in 1930 to fiftieth. That happens when you get sharp swings from the left to right in government along with large-scale state corruption.

In South Africa there has never been a major economic slump lasting for more than three or four years. The upward curve of the economy is virtually unbroken such the time of Union of South Africa. Since 1945 the size of the economy increased by threefold times. What were the reasons for the astounding growth of South Africa in the twentieth century? Why did the country not remain a mining camp with a stunted manufacturing sector and dependent largely on imports for manufactured goods and food? Why has South Africa grown so strongly?

Continuity in the civil service

It was that bête noire of Afrikaner historiography, lord Alfred Milner, who was responsible for inaugurating the good and efficient administration that was so beneficial for economic growth. He had this refreshing, if undemocratic perspective on governing a country: “All good government is good administration, all the rest is rot.” Michael O’Dowd correctly observed that by 1910 South Africa had a far better civil service than any country could expect at that stage of its development. He introduced proper tax collection, local government, and independent, clean civil service. Although the Afrikaners acquired political power in 1910 it did not insist on Afrikanerising the middle and top levels of the civil service. It took until 1960 before the top levels of the civil service matched the white population composition. Apart from a few isolated cases, corruption on the higher levels was rare.

The government, left alone an English business class, was unapologetic about striving for wealth

There is no place in the world that I know of where a community like English-speaking South Africans was so lacking in political power and yet so totally dominant in the economy. Yet they did not feel any need to apologise for their economic power or to assist the Afrikaners or any other group in building up their businesses. English-speaking business in fact went on with the business of doing business. All the mining houses eventually had their head-offices in South Africa, and from the 1920s invested a growing share of profits in local industry.

The politicians during the period of Union had the good sense of starting a para-statal sector

One of the strange things about South Africa is that there never was a serious attempt to nationalise industry. The Hertzog government embarked on the establishment of Iscor and Escom and the Smuts government founded the Industrial Development Corporation. These corporations provided the main avenue for Afrikaner acquiring managerial expertise and they also dampened the ardour for nationalisation.

To have the history of a colonial state does not condemn a state to failure

Colonialism certainly was cruel and unjust, but it also created the potential for a successful state. Brazil was also a colonial state but is now considered a successful state despite inequalities as huge of those of South Africa. Algeria and Zimbabwe are considered by many to be failed states. Despite the huge inequalities South Africa was never considered a failed state.

By 1976 it was well on the road to becoming a successful state. On the world-rating list it had the 18th largest economy and it was the 15th largest trading country. By 2007 it had fallen to 28th and 37th on the list. What went wrong?

Black and coloured people continued to strive for a better life despite the handicaps imposed on them

For South Africa to democratise it needed the following

- a prolonged period of growth that lifted the members of the electorate to a position where their skills rather than their colour was their safeguard, and where those excluded from the vote steadily advanced economically.
- a functioning system of mass education,
- social and political organization in all sections of the population,
- occupational mobility,
- the growing degree of house ownership
- mass-consumption

To most of these developments black and coloured people made an enormous contribution. They did everything they could to get their children a good education, although they knew it was inferior to that of whites. They built trade unions despite oppressive measures. They acquired their own homes and became consumers. They became politically active and formed organizations and civic societies. During the 1980s they mustered enough opposition to white rule to force the government to fundamentally reconsider its position.

History tells us where we come from and who we are, and if we are lucky it may teach us a little bit of wisdom

In a country like South Africa with its history of division the question

of social identity is often addressed on different levels. Every person is an individual. Most identifies with the people of South Africa, but there are also individuals who identify strongly with their particular community or a religious group.

Tony Judt, one of the most interesting modern historians, remarked: “History is a story, a story needs a narrator and a narrator needs to be standing somewhere. The view from nowhere does not work”.⁷ He stressed that the concern with the universal should not obscure the national or the particular elements of political change.

The first challenge of history is to learn to understand and judge yourself and your community before attempting to understand and judge others. When I began writing a book on the Afrikaners in the mid-1990s, I saw my challenge as that of writing with empathy and understanding, without condoning or explaining away the injustices the Afrikaners perpetrated. In the book’s introduction, written late in 2002, I would cite the words of FDH Kitto, a historian of Greece in antiquity: “To understand is not necessarily to pardon, but there is no harm in trying to understand”. This statement is not quite the safe position it seems. Neville Alexander, a literary scholar and political activist responded to Kitto’s words by citing Madame De Stael’s ‘*tout comprendre rend très indulgent*’. The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Quotations* translates this as: “To be totally understanding makes one very indulgent”. One could also say “too indulgent”. Alexander’s comment highlights the very fine but also very important line between apology and empathy.

An American scholar who had embarked on a study of the Maoris in New Zealand asked a respected Maori leader how to approach the task: He advised her first to write the story of her own people. We cannot begin to understand or judge other people before we get to know our own respective communities well –warts and all.

A second lesson of history is to respect the integrity of each historical epoch and to refrain from judging people with the benefit of hindsight. In insisting that historians should try to record history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, the German historian Leopold von Ranke implored people to engage in an exercise in *historische verstehen*, which is to understand the past in its own context. The task was to understand the past, not to change the present political order. Hence, the study of the past should be divorced from the “end result”, the passions, values and motivations of our present day. Each period

7 T Judt, ‘The Story of Everything’, *New York Review of Books*, 21 September 2000, p. 66.

in history was “immediate to God” and had to be treated on its own terms. There were creative forces and moral energies at work in the past that gave a study of history value and meaning in their own right.

The British historian Herbert Butterfield suggested an apt metaphor for an attempt to write history to conform to present prejudices and obsessions: “When we organise our general history with reference to the present we are producing what is really a giant optical illusion”. It is quite wrong to abstract things from their historical context and judge them apart from their context. It is also wrong to see history marching inexorably to its fated outcome. In each generation there is what Butterfield calls “a clash of wills out of which there emerges something that probably no man ever willed”.⁸

The third challenge is to get students or pupils to grapple not only with what indeed did happen but also with what did not happen and the reason why history did not take an alternative course or courses. The Dutch historian Johan Huizenga advised historians to constantly put themselves “at point in the past at which the known factors will seem to permit different outcomes”.⁹

Thirteen years ago a book appeared that is edited by Niall Ferguson, the well-known economic historian. Called *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (Picadoc 1997). Among the chapter headings there are:

- What if there had been no American Revolution?
- What if Britain had stood aside in August 1914?
- What if Nazi Germany had defeated Britain?
- What if the Communism had not collapsed?
- The book stimulated me to write a column. What if South Africa in 1948 chose the qualified franchise instead of apartheid?

Defending the use of counter-factuals as a heuristic device, Ferguson writes that we constantly ask counter-factual questions in our daily lives and then adds:¹⁰

Of course we know perfectly that we cannot travel back in time and do things differently, But the business of imagining such counterfactuals is a vital part of the way we learn, Because decisions about the future are—usually—based on weighing up the potential consequences of alternative courses of action, it makes sense to compare the actual outcomes of what we did in the past with the conceivable outcomes of what we might have done.

8 H Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of the Past* (New York, Norton, 1965), p. 28.

9 N Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counter-factuals* (London, Picador, 1997), p. 1.

10 N Ferguson, *Virtual History...*, p. 2.

Ferguson writes that we constantly ask counter-factual questions in our daily lives.

People read history and novels to put themselves in the position of people having to make critical decisions that test their moral character. The challenge for the historian and particularly for the historian is to enable the student or the reader to enter into the minds of people on both sides of a conflict and view their fears and aspirations sympathetically.

Let us for instance take the example of the Munich agreement that Neville Chamberlain in 1938 signed with Adolf Hitler in an attempt to stave off a second world war within the space of twenty years. Was Chamberlain misguided or was he in fact quite rational to try to reach an agreement with Nazi Germany? We must try to assess his motivations without bringing into play our knowledge that Hitler was utterly ill-suited as a negotiating partner and that Nazi Germany was bent on war.

We can also point out the necessity of understanding the uniqueness of Munich and Hitler and the American folly of fighting a war in Vietnam or Afghanistan on the spurious grounds that the lessons of Munich was to stand up to dictators at an early stage. As important as the so-called lessons of history is the urgent need to understand the dangers of drawing the wrong lessons from history.

Just as Hitler wanted a super German state in Europe Alfred Milner in the 1890s wanted a super federal state consisting of Britain, Australia, Canada and a new South Africa governed by the superior Anglo-Saxon race federal state. In later years a noted British journalist remarked: 'As a racist politician Milner is the only important British leader who deserves some comparison with Hitler. Both looked forward to world domination by their own tribe of the white race; both engineered and provoked war to bring that vision nearer.'¹¹ Historians and history teachers should ask the question. Would Afrikaner nationalism ever have gained such force if Milner had not succeeded in engineering war.

There is also the key issue of resistance to apartheid. In 1960-61 the ANC leadership was increasingly harassed and the movement was banned. The strategic options open to the leadership were debated. Was the decision to embark on armed resistance the best? Did the ANC waste time until the 1980s when the shift to a people's war took place?

¹¹ N Ascherson, 'The War That Made South Africa', *New York Review of Books*, 6 December 1979, p. 12.

A key question about apartheid that needs to be asked is the following: What were the alternative options to the government at the time the Second World War ended? To what extent did apartheid differ fundamentally from the policy of segregation that preceded it?

To address these questions a look at *No Easy Choice* by Huntington and Nelson is instructive. (It must be emphasised that the authors did *not* write it with South Africa in mind.) It proposes three models to depict different development paths, which I outline below. I am offering the models here as variants of employing counter-factual history as a heuristic device,

The first model of Huntington and Nelson is what they call the ‘vicious circle of the technocratic model’:

- less political participation (i.e. curtailment of the vote);
- leading to more socio-economic development as a result of the suppression of the working class;
- less socio-economic equality;
- less political stability;
- and ending with a participation explosion.

This was the route South Africa by and large followed, except for the fact that there was not less socio-economic equality but a slow narrowing of the white-black gap. The apartheid period can be divided into two: the harsh and rigid first phase, lasting until the early 1970s, and the reformist phase from 1972-1994. By the early 1990s South Africa was spending more, as a percentage of GDP, on social assistance in the form of non-contributory schemes than developed countries and more than almost any country in the developing South. In 1993 interracial parity was achieved in old-age pensions.¹²

The second model they call the “vicious circle of the populist model”

- more political participation (i.e. extension of the vote);
- leading to more socio-economic equality;
- less socio-economic development;
- less political stability and the flight of capital ;
- and a participation implosion (i.e. suspension of democracy).

12 J Seekings, ‘Providing for the poor: Welfare and redistribution in South Africa,’ Inaugural lecture, University of Cape Town, 23 April 2003.

In the article I argue that this is more or less what would have happened if the ANC had gained power in the 1950s: a rapid extension of the franchise from the platform of the qualified vote, leading the implementation of the Freedom Charter and the nationalisation of several industries. As a result of a flight of investment capital there would be less socio-economic development followed by less political stability (white resistance and urban riots) ending in a 'participation implosion' (suspension of Parliament and the rule of law).

Huntington and Nelson also introduce a third model, the 'benign liberal model.' This assumes that broad-based socio-economic development would lead to greater socio-economic equality, producing both political stability and democratic political participation.

The journalistic view of apartheid in South Africa today is a crude amalgam of both the liberal and populist model. Let me explain graphically what this belief entails:

- the more people regardless of their colour or descent after 1945 were brought into the market; and schools on the basis of equality;
- the more the economy would open up and the more the labour market would be liberalised;
- the more the economy would expand;
- the more political freedoms would increase;
- the more stable the political system would become;
- the more racial and ethnic tensions would dissolve;
- the more prosperity and happiness would ensue.

In brief, this adds up to the proposition that liberal capitalism (a free-market economy) and a liberal democracy go together. This is indeed what happens in a developed country, like the USA in the twentieth century. However, liberal capitalism and liberal democracy have not gone together in countries in the Southeast Asia and in Africa with deep racial and ethnic divisions. In these societies, and also in South Africa, people do not compete or vote on an individual basis, as liberals believe, but as members of a group. The market strongly tends to favour certain ethnic minorities over the other.

One does not know what would have happened if a free market and free political institutions had been introduced at the outset. But the colonial state of nineteenth century South Africa, like other colonial states intervened heavily in favour of whites, which made the twentieth century struggle over

control of the state particularly intense.

Conclusion

We study history to learn the basic facts of the past that help to explain the world in which we live. Our world is radically different from the world that past generations had known but that does not mean that some lessons of some of the events of the past are no longer applicable. When the biography of Siegmund Warburg, a great London banker of the previous century was launched recently, the author, Niall Ferguson, was asked this question: What was the great moral change between today, with the world facing a major financial crisis, and the days in which Warburg worked. His answer was that they had seared into their memories the lessons of the Great Depression and particularly the lessons of reckless, speculative banking. Every financial and political scoundrel likes to make the claim that the systems of the modern era are different, is much more sophisticated and can never fail. That is where a sense of history comes in. What a study of history says is: Pride comes before a fall. It had happened before. History urges caution.

School children and teachers today face a much more complex world than people like I did in the 1950s (as a pupil) and in the early 1960s (as a teacher). Yet some things did not change. The best thing high school education can give a young person is the ability to think independently and to write clearly (the two often go together). To this I would *historische verstehen*, a historical understanding that comprehends the past in its own context. If one grasps what made societies change in the past one may well be in a better position to make more sense of the turbulent politics of current societies. At least one is likely to be slightly less surprised by unexpected twists and turns.

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September 2010