

JAH Forum

E. P. THOMPSON, ‘SOCIAL HISTORY’, AND SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY, 1970–90*

Peter Delius

University of the Witwatersrand

Abstract

It is often suggested that the work of E. P. Thomson played a pivotal role in shaping South African historical writing and provided the foundations for a new school of social history. Thompson’s writings – often refracted through many other texts – were one influence amongst many. This article, drawing on my own experiences of key moments of individuals and institutions, argues that the decisive and central role that is ascribed to his work does not accord with much more complex and localised realities. The article touches on numerous other influences that shaped the research and writing of succeeding cohorts of historians. It also suggests that while *The Poverty of Theory* was an influential publication, it did not initiate new forms of research and writing, but rather contributed to debates that were already well underway. In conclusion, the usefulness of the category of social history is disputed, as in the South African context it lends to a lazy lumping together of a very diverse selection of historians and needs to be rethought or replaced.

Key Words

South Africa, Southern Africa, historiography, oral sources, local history, biography.

A recurring refrain in recent commentary on South African historiography is that the work of E. P. Thomson played a pivotal role in shaping South African historical writing and provided the foundations for a new school of social history. For example, Jonathan Hyslop’s account of the emergence of social history asserts that:

E. P. Thompson has had an enormous impact on the writing of history in South Africa ... A Thompsonian brand of history also gave an intellectual impetus to remarkable efforts in the popularization of historical research...¹

Isabel Hofmeyr suggests:

* Patrick Harries provided me with valuable insights while I was drafting this article, but his tragic death in 2016 means that I am not able to thank him for his help in person. He will be sorely missed. He was a fine, innovative historian who showed great intellectual and personal generosity to both his peers and his students. Author’s email: peter.delius@wits.ac.za

1 J. Hyslop, ‘E. P. Thompson in South Africa: the practice and politics of social history in an era of revolt and transition, 1976–2012’, *International Review of Social History*, 61:1 (2016), 95–116.

That *The Making* exercised a powerful influence in South African intellectual life is beyond question. Thompson style social history inspired a ‘history from below’ movement that in turn fed into art, drama, public history and workers and adult education programs.²

These formulations along with many others led the organisers of a stimulating recent workshop on ‘History after E. P. Thompson’ to posit:³

Thompson’s attack on Althusserian Marxism, *The Poverty of Theory*, helped fuel a reaction against structuralist accounts of racial capitalism in South Africa which took the form of social history ... With retrospect this was both a productive and unproductive development ... encouraging sensitivity towards culture and the analysis of class as process, while nurturing a common sense ... generally hostile disposition towards theory. From the mid-1980s social historians were much less likely to engage with larger theoretical and comparative debates ... Curiously, the precocious sensitivity to culture which South African social historians developed was not facilitated by the kinds of anthropological influence that were important to the ‘cultural turn’ in Anglo-American scholarship.⁴

I would agree that Thompson’s writings – often refracted through many other texts – were one influence amongst many. But the decisive and central role that is ascribed to his work does not accord with my experiences of the shifts in South African historical writing and research of the 1970s and the 1980s. No more than a bit player in a much larger drama, my recollections are a very meagre offering but they may contribute to a more nuanced account of this historiography.⁵ As Belinda Bozzoli and I pointed out in 1989, historians who were sometimes lumped together as revisionist, radical, or neo-Marxist were in reality a diverse crowd with a wide range of intellectual influences and lineages.⁶ They were united by little more than opposition to apartheid and hostility to a sometimes sketchily conceived ‘liberal’ analysis of the past and route to the future. In the introduction to *Radical History Review* we set out key divisions in an account which remains helpful, albeit compressed, that I shall not rehash in this context. It is worth noting, however, we neither use the term ‘social history’ as a key organising category nor suggest that Thompson’s writings were especially influential.

2 I. Hofmeyr, ‘South African remains: E. P. Thompson, Biko and the limits of the making of the English working class’, *Historical Reflections*, 41:1 (2015), 100.

3 See, for example, K. Breckenridge, ‘Hopeless entanglement: a short history of the humanities in South Africa’, *American Historical Review*, October (2015).

4 S. Sparks and K. Breckenridge, call for papers for ‘History after E. P. Thompson’ workshop at the University of Michigan, Nov. 2015, submitted on Wits website, (<http://wiser.wits.ac.za/event/history-after-ep-thompson>), 16. Mar 2015.

5 Keith Breckenridge and Stephen Sparks, who suggested I sketch my own intellectual history as a paper for the ‘History after E. P. Thompson’ workshop, must take most of the blame for this autobiographical turn.

6 B. Bozzoli and P. Delius, ‘Editors’ Introduction’, *Radical History Review*, 46/47 (1990); for other accounts focused on the period covered by this article and written at this time, see S. Marks ‘The historiography of South Africa’, in B. Jewsiewicki and D. Newbury (eds.), *African Historiography* (Beverly Hills, 1986); and C. Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past* (Cape Town, 1988). The unwary reader should be warned that the *Radical History* special issue, especially our Introduction and Bozzoli’s chapter, ‘Intellectuals, audiences and histories’ received a very critical reception indeed. See, for example, the *South African Historical Journal* (1991).

THE MAKING OF A MINOR HISTORIAN

I left Cape Town for the United Kingdom in 1968 and finished my schooling in the Colleges of Further Education in London. In this new world I was exposed to a torrent of new ideas and experiences. But I also grew increasingly curious about the continent on which I had grown up. As a result I enrolled for a Bachelor of Arts at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University in 1971. I selected a new course – African History and Social Anthropology – which involved two majors, not the one that was the usual form at the time. As a result of this, I had no further formal training in the history of the rest of the globe and certainly not in British social history.

The SOAS African History Department, founded by Roland Oliver and John Fage, had played a central part in the establishment of the field of study in the United Kingdom.⁷ In the 1960s and early 1970s its graduates populated history departments in anglophone Africa and found jobs in Europe and the US. When I arrived it boasted a distinguished contingent of staff presided over by the still formidable Roland Oliver. There was a strong focus on the importance of research on precolonial history and the use of oral traditions in retrieving it. In keeping with the broader ‘Africanist’ school there was an emphasis on the emergence and operation of African states. Jacob Ajayi’s insistence on the significance of the continuities within African societies, notwithstanding the massive changes brought by colonial rule, was influential.⁸ But there was also a strong emphasis on more modern history. The work of the Dar es Salam School was much debated. Terence Ranger’s emphasis on African ‘initiative’, African activity, African adaptation, and African choice was especially influential and, as a result, the importance of agency was drummed into me from the beginning of my academic training.⁹ Analyses of the growth of mass nationalist movements, including relationships between leaders and followers, elites and the ‘masses’ and the challenge of overcoming regional and ethnic divisions, were staples in our diets. The importance of African belief systems and religious leaders was foregrounded through the analysis of the Rhodesian Revolts of 1896/1897 and Maji Maji Rebellion in 1905–7 in Tanganyika.¹⁰ The impact of Islam, Christianity, and Western education were recurring topics. The list could go on. But by the early 1970s there was also an increasing concern about the role of historical processes in shaping the travails of post-independence Africa – the concerns of the ‘radical pessimists’ were rapidly gaining influence.¹¹

The lecturer who made the deepest impression on me was Shula Marks. I had previously been exposed to little more than fragments of South African historical writing and most of

7 R. Oliver and J. Fage, *A Short History of Africa* (London, 1988 [orig. pub. 1962]) was a pioneering work that sold in considerable numbers through multiple editions, while J. Fage and R. Oliver (eds.), *Cambridge History of Africa*, in *Volume XIII* (Cambridge, 1976–1988) represented a more comprehensive summation of the burgeoning historical work.

8 J. F. Ade Ajayi, ‘The continuity of African institutions under colonialism’, in T. O. Ranger (ed.), *Emerging Themes of African History* (London, 1968).

9 Ranger (ed.), ‘Introduction’, *Emerging Themes of African History*, xxi.

10 T. O. Ranger, *Revolt of Southern Rhodesia 1896–1897* (London, 1967); J. Iliffe, *Tanganyika under Colonial Rule* (Cambridge, 1969).

11 *Ibid.*

what she taught us in her overview courses was a revelation to me. But I also had the considerable good fortune of being her student when she was presiding over the first phase of the Societies of Southern Africa Seminar Series at which many of the seminal papers were given that set in motion revisionist interpretations. She was also at the epicentre of the wider network of scholars and managed, despite sometimes bitter disputes, to keep on mainly good terms with all of them. What I can recall from her teaching in that period was a critical engagement with *Oxford History of South Africa*, highlighting its failure to fully incorporate the work of Africanists.¹² I recall that she introduced us to Legassick's critique of the frontier as the source of South Africa's racial order and to F. A. Johnstone's argument that racism, rather than being incompatible with capitalism, was in fact functional to the growth of the mining industry. Shula encouraged us to read Colin Bundy's paper on the rise and fall of a peasantry and Charles van Onselen's contributions on worker consciousness. In the document-based course we did with her in our final year as undergraduates, she set out to train us in the methods of meticulous archival research, displayed to such good effect in her book on the Bambatha uprising, *Reluctant Rebellion*.¹³

I do not recall any specific mention of E. P. Thompson's work at that time. But in retrospect I can see that that his writing is often referred to, along with a wider set of influences, in the footnotes of the first revisionist essays. It is intriguing that his work features more prominently in these bibliographies than in those of the next generation of 'revolting social historians'. But it does not appear that he was the primary inspiration for any of the founding texts. Stanley Trapido drew heavily on Barrington Moore. Harold Wolpe's central argument was rooted in long standing debates in the South African Communist Party, reprised through contemporary concerns with the articulation of modes of production. Legassick's work on the frontier was strongly influenced by debates on slavery and frontier within American history. Johnstone's analysis of the colour bar in the mining industry rested on an orthodox rendition of Marxist theory, showing none of the historical and cultural sensitivities of Thompson's work. Bundy was influenced by the peasantry debate and under-development theory. Van Onselen's understanding of class formation and consciousness did not echo that of Thompson, although he did explicitly draw on his insights in relation to industrial discipline.¹⁴

As I had undertaken a joint major I was also getting a thorough grounding in British Social Anthropology from some of the leading scholars in the field. Unsurprisingly, the

12 L. Thompson and M. Wilson, *Oxford History of South Africa, Volume II* (Oxford, 1971 [orig. pub. 1969]).

13 S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion* (Oxford, 1970).

14 For some of the published fruit of this work, see, for example, S. Trapido, 'South Africa in a comparative study of industrialisation', *Journal of Development Studies*, 7 (1971); H. Wolpe, 'Capitalism and cheap labour power: from segregation to apartheid', *Economy and Society*, 1 (1972); M. Leggasick, 'The frontier tradition in South African historiography', in S. Marks and A. Atmore (eds.), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980). Leggasick wrote many important papers and articles in this period. Some, like this one, took a long time to be published, sadly others were never published; R. Johnstone, *Class Race and Gold* (London, 1976); C. Bundy, 'The emergence and decline of a South African peasantry', *African Affairs*, 71 (1972); C. van Onselen, *Chibaro* (London, 1976). For overviews of the development of revisionist history, see Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past*; Bozzoli and Delius, 'Introduction', *Radical History Review*, and Marks, 'Historiography'.

Africanists – in particular John Middleton, Abner Cohen, and David Parkin – had the greatest impact.¹⁵ There were no southern Africanists in the department, so most of the African examples we studied were from West and East Africa. The debates around the nature of political and economic systems left a deep mark on my thinking and, although British social anthropology was less cultural in its orientation than its American counterpart, we paid a great deal of attention to culture, symbolism, and ritual. We were fed a diet of classic texts in sociology and anthropology and our courses included the work of Edmund Leach, Mary Douglas, and Levi Strauss. Max Gluckman and the Manchester School were especially influential.

When I decided to register for a PhD, the vibrant and politically-charged debate on South Africa's past, present, and future sealed my choice of region. My Africanist training influenced my desire to work on a precolonial, or at least a preconquest, topic and with oral as well as documentary sources. During my undergraduate years I had developed a strong interest in the interaction between different kinds of society such as the conflict on the eastern Cape Frontier, the emergence of Swahili society, and the relationship between the Portuguese and the Kingdom of the Kongo. Revisionist perspectives on the significance of the frontier in South African history did not diminish my interest in these issues, but made me much less inclined to see them as the crucible of racism and segregation. Marks's and Atmore's stress on the role of the imperial factor in securing the conditions for capitalist development and safeguarding British economic interests, along with the wider emphasis on the importance of the mining industry and migrant labour, ensured that I was particularly interested in the evolution of these systems.¹⁶

Social anthropology provided me with a quiver of questions about the operation of African political systems, the interplay of power and symbolism, and more. Looking back to the introduction to my PhD reminds me that I was especially influenced by conflict theorists who proceeded from the assumption that in most societies scarce resources were not evenly distributed, and that competition for control of these resources generated conflict. The influence of Weberian action theory and forms of games theory also contributed to a focus on process rather than structure.¹⁷ But I also had reservations about the value of these approaches, noting that they tended to atomise society and failed to identify the key cleavages around which conflicts coalesced or fully explore the structural constraints on individuals choices and strategies. I was concerned that dominant norms and values should not be seen as given and outside the arena in which the struggle for power took place. The work of John Comaroff on political processes within Tswana society, and particularly on succession disputes, proved especially valuable insights for my own work.¹⁸ With the benefit of hindsight I can see that I tended towards a rather instrumental view

15 See A. Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa* (Routledge, London, 1969); D. Parkin, *Palms, Wines and Witnesses* (London, 1972).

16 A. Atmore and S. Marks, 'The imperial factor in South Africa: towards a reassessment', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 3 (1974) was very influential for my generation of historians.

17 P. Delius, 'Introduction: the Pedi Polity under Sekwati and Sekhukhune, 1820–1880' (unpublished PhD thesis, London University, 1980).

18 *Ibid.*

of culture/symbolism, but it was far from reductionist. I certainly did not see these dimensions as epiphenomenal or without force in the own right.

The arrival of William Beinart at SOAS at this time pointed to another important and in my view rather neglected influence on the growth of revisionist history in the 1970s. Chris Saunders had since the late 1960s taught courses in African history at the University of Cape Town (UCT). In the early 1970s he was joined by Robin Hallet, who had spent some years based at Oxford without securing a permanent post. He had recently completed a pioneering general history of Africa.¹⁹ Hallet was an inspiring teacher and captured the interest of a generation of students. The courses offered by Saunders and Hallet influenced a group who went on to do PhDs in African History, including William Beinart, Jeff Peires, Debbie Gaitskell, Ian Phillips, and Patrick Harries. The UCT history department more broadly became an influential historical incubator. One remarkable honours class included many of the above. Most went on to SOAS. Jeff Peires, who studied at University of Wisconsin, kept in contact with the wider UCT and SOAS cohort. Another important centre was the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg which, under the leadership of Colin Webb, influenced a number of students who went on to play a central role in the new historical writing, including Jeff Guy, John Wright, and Colin Bundy.

Influenced by the strong emphasis on Marxist approaches in revisionist thinking but working a precolonial topic outside of the main focus of debate I, like many others, turned to the Marxist currents in social anthropology at the time. French anthropologists – including Meillassoux, Godelier, and Terray – were leading influences but their work and other Marxist writing also had a significant impact on British anthropology, in part through a new journal *Critique of Anthropology*.²⁰ We wrestled with their analyses and tried to see how they might apply in a southern African context. In 1975, William Beinart, Jeff Guy, and I formed a small discussion group that met regularly in the SOAS bar and became increasingly animated and theoretically advanced as the evening progressed. Initially the incorporation of these perspectives produced some rather clumsy transplants; the brief hegemony of the puce and crassly idealist volume by Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst represented the low point.²¹

In the longer term, Marxist anthropology stimulated debate about the economy and the nature of power, and the divisions and struggles within precolonial societies. In considerably modified form, the concept of modes of production helped us to formulate questions about the nature of the evolving relationship between African societies and white farmers, traders, officials, and capitalists.²² But their work was less helpful to the analysis of the political and religious forces, which could and did have wide ranging consequences for the incorporation of Africans.

19 R. Hallet, *A History of Africa to 1875* (Michigan, 1970).

20 See, for example, C. Meillassoux, 'From reproduction to production: a Marxist approach to economic anthropology', *Economy and Society*, 1 (1972); see also M. Bloch (ed.), *Marxist Analysis and Social Anthropology* (London, 1975).

21 B. Hindess and P. Hirst, *Precapitalist Modes of Production* (London, 1975).

22 See, for example, W. Beinart, 'Chieftainship and the concept of articulation in South Africa', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 19 (1985); and P. Harries, 'Modes of production and modes of analyses: the South African case', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 19 (1985).

While the excitement generated by the work of the first round of revisionist debate was infectious, it proved far from obvious as to how it could be used to illuminate precolonial history and the rural transformation that were at the core of some of our projects. Van Onselen's influential work on mine labour in Southern Rhodesia was resolutely colonial and compound/urban in focus. Bundy's work, while important in putting the issue of rural transformation on the agenda, rested on a static, idealised account of precolonial African society. Wolpe was even more ahistorical and schematic in his treatment of African society. We did not have a fully formulated critique at that time but wrestled nonetheless with the applicability of these models to our research. In addition, unlike many of the first generation of revisionists, many of us were planning oral as well as archival research.

It was in this context that we formulated our PhD proposals. A central and daunting challenge for those based at SOAS was how to withstand the searching scrutiny of Roland Oliver's African history seminar with its strong Africanist orientation while navigating the shark-infested Marxist-tinged waters of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies seminar. It was a prospect that produced profound anxiety and intense thought about what a credible synthesis of these approaches might be. This introspection left a deep mark on my work and, I imagine, on the thinking of the wider cohort of PhD students.

The work that we ultimately produced was also powerfully shaped by the plunge into the chilly waters of research. There were masses of little-used material in the archives on African societies that could be drawn on – especially if one ventured beyond sources in English (which had been the mainstay of 'liberal' historiography) and explored the voluminous records of the South African Republic (ZAR) or the rich archives of the German, Swiss, and French missionaries. Faced with this enormous volume of evidence, many of us had to cut back the scope and scale of our research. My PhD topic, for example, ultimately shed eighty years of its planned coverage. Sometime later I worked with Stanley Trapido, who had stressed the importance of broad processes of rural transformation in comparative perspective. Our joint research produced a vast pile of photocopies from the Pretoria archives and chapters on Abel Erasmus, a Boer notable, and tenancy on Sammy Marks's Vereeniging Estates.²³ Perhaps we should have been bolder but the difficulty of encountering large amounts or often recalcitrant detail in the absence of a well-developed secondary literature should not be underestimated. We agreed that we needed to understand more about specific processes before reaching bigger conclusions. It was also clear that there were dozens of topics that needed to be researched for the first time or in greater depth. Then, as now, the precolonial history of African societies remained especially under-researched. There was, and is, a vast difference between the rich resources of historical research that exist for European and American societies and the relatively sparse and profoundly skewed literature on South Africa.

Engaging with oral history also left a deep impression. Philip Bonner led the way with a major drive to collect Swazi oral history, costing him several cars and very nearly his life.²⁴

²³ See P. Delius, 'Abel Erasmus: Power and profit in the eastern Transvaal', and S. Trapido, 'A history of tenant production on the Vereeniging estates 1896–1920', in W. Beinart, P. Delius, and S. Trapido (eds.), *Putting a Plough to the Ground* (Johannesburg, 1986).

²⁴ P. Bonner, *Kings Commoners and Concessionaires* (Cambridge, 1983).

Jeff Peires also carried out in-depth work on Xhosa oral traditions.²⁵ William Beinart focused on the more recent history of Pondoland.²⁶ My own attempts to collect oral traditions within the heartland of the Pedi Kingdom, whilst also costly in terms of motor vehicles, produced a much more limited harvest than I had hoped for. (I have set out the reasons for this outcome elsewhere.)²⁷ But all of us spent prolonged periods living in rural areas, interacting with local people and observing social processes. I spent many hours in conversation with the individuals who had taken me under their wing. These exchanges, along with the number of life history interviews I conducted, opened my eyes to historical processes in the twentieth century that were entirely absent from the established literature. I also learned that the ways in which people talked about, explained, and periodised their histories and wider changes in the region often sat rather uneasily with my own analytical categories and narrative structures.

Eventually I returned to England, chastened by the experience and frankly at a loss as to how to deal with the masses of material I had collected over 18 months in East Berlin and then in South Africa. My unease was deepened by the emergence of a group of students who appeared to have developed 20/20 vision, while the clarity of my sight seemed to have sharply deteriorated. At roughly the same time, as we were setting off for the archives and fieldwork, a cohort coalesced at Sussex University. Their work was located unambiguously within the tradition of French structuralism, drawing on Althusser and especially Poulantzas and mainly focused on the state. When we arrived back from our research trips, battling to come to terms with the detail in which we had become immersed, they had become a strong presence in the various intellectual forums in which we participated. Most alarming for me was the idealist approach they adopted towards theoretical categories and their tendency to see empirical research as secondary to developing and applying theory.²⁸ Theoretical eclecticism and a more empirical orientation were viewed with scepticism. I went blank when asked to explain my theoretical position in a word or a phrase. What in reality were differences of approach to the intersection of theory and evidence were caricatured as a difference between theoretically informed work and mindless empiricism.²⁹ Failure to locate one's research in the dominant (then structuralist) paradigm was often seen as a failure of any form of comparative or theoretical engagement.

It was in this bracing context that E. P. Thompson's work first had a major impact on me. This was not because it changed the way that I thought about history in a significant way but rather because it provided an eloquent account of a historian's craft, including the interplay of concept and evidence and the importance of process and consciousness. It was of course not the only critique of structuralism, but it had a huge impact at the time of its publication – especially amongst historians. Now, when I was challenged about my

25 J. Peires, *The House of Phalo* (Ravan, 1981).

26 W. Beinart, *The Political Economy of Pondoland* (Cambridge, 1982).

27 P. Delius, *The Land Belongs to Us* (Johannesburg, London and Berkeley, 1983/1984); Delius, *Lion amongst the Cattle*, 229–36.

28 See Bozzoli and Delius, 'Introduction', *Radical History Review*, for a brief description of, and bibliography for this group.

29 For a fuller discussion of these issues, see P. Delius and S. Schirmer, 'Historical research and policy making in South Africa', *African Studies*, 59:1 (2000), 5–7.

mindless empiricism, I could say ‘Read Thompson and you will have a better grasp of how a good historian combines theory and evidence.’ Not, sadly, that I read much of Thompson’s writing beyond that essay. I was still far too deeply immersed in the mounds of material I had gathered on the inner workings of the Pedi Kingdom, the machinations of the ZAR, and the dynamics driving imperial expansion.³⁰

In 1978, Stanley Trapido assembled a group of researchers at Queen Elizabeth House – William Beinart, Colin Bundy, Robin Palmer, Peter Richardson, and myself – to investigate rural transformations in nineteenth- and twentieth-century southern Africa. While wider debates about Thompson and structuralism swirled around us, the main context for our work was the ongoing empirically grounded work on South African History and the range of debates and presentations that took place at the weekly ‘Peasant to Worker’ Seminar convened by Stanley Trapido. Aside from PhD presentations, the main debates I recall were arguments about the role of peasants in capitalist economies, dominated by scholars of Africa and India. Theodore Shanin’s work on differentiation within peasant societies and the Brenner debate about the transition to capitalism were widely discussed. Then, as now, I felt that the analysis of the original transition to capitalism had limited relevance for understanding rural transformations in a world already partly under the sway of capitalism. There was also a growing critique of underdevelopment theory and mounting doubt among some of us about the usefulness of the concept of a peasantry in illuminating the rich material we were uncovering on the diverse forms of transformation in southern Africa. Bundy’s work became a main focus of the latter discussion and particularly influential critiques were developed by Terence Ranger and Fred Cooper. William Beinart’s illuminating study of the *Political Economy of Pondoland* set a new benchmark. Our work, along with that of a number of others, also called into question ahistorical and functionalist explanations of the development of the migrant labour system in South Africa.³¹

In *Putting a Plough to the Ground*, we attempted to provide an overview of the range of processes and regional dynamics at play that had emerged from the Oxford project.³² This attempt at synthesis without losing sight of variations over time and region was one of a number of forays that sometimes get overlooked in the condemnation of fragmented ‘social history’. Other examples include the various overviews by Shula Marks, the introduction by Bonner, Delius, and Posel to *Apartheid’s Genesis*, and William Beinart’s general history.³³ In our introduction to *Putting a Plough to the Ground*, we also acknowledged that, rather than being the revolutionary break from liberal scholarship some of the revisionist work proclaimed, we were to a degree standing on the shoulders of the work of

30 For the results of this immersion see P. Delius, *The Land Belongs to Us* (Johannesburg, London and Berkeley 1983/1984).

31 Beinart, *The Political Economy of Pondoland*; T. O. Ranger, ‘Growing from the roots, reflections on peasant research in Central and Southern Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5 (1978); F. Cooper, ‘Peasants, capitalists and historians’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 7 (1981).

32 Beinart, Delius, and Trapido (eds.), *Putting a Plough to the Ground*.

33 P. Bonner, P. Delius, and D. Posel, *Apartheid’s Genesis* (Johannesburg, 1990); W. Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa* (Oxford, 1994).

Macmillan, De Kiewiet, and Robinson, among others. Belinda Bozzoli and I later elaborated on this point in the *Radical History Review* pointing out:

Macmillan and De Kiewiet's work represented a form of social democratic thought which had radical implications... influenced by Fabianism and British social historians they saw industrialisation and social and economic divisions as vitally important, argued that history should also tell of the everyday life of people ... collected oral history ... In reality their work provided foundations on which later [radical revisionist scholarship] could build.³⁴

In the middle of 1981, I left Oxford to take a six-month contract at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), which allowed Philip Bonner to dedicate himself entirely to working with the trade union movement. During my time in South Africa in 1976 and my regular visits back for the Oxford project I became increasingly immersed in the intellectually vibrant and politically engaged world of left-leaning Wits academics. With the emergence of the independent trade union movements after the Durban strikes of 1973 and the Soweto Revolt of 1976 there was a strong sense that the forces of change were gathering momentum and that academics could play some part in the process. There was also a sense of camaraderie amongst the small group of radicals on campus who were often viewed with considerable suspicion in their own departments. It was a far cry from a rather alienated life amidst Oxford's dreaming spires. My desire to relocate to Wits on a long-term basis was very nearly derailed by a group in the history department who felt that one revisionist Africanist was more than enough. Fortunately their view did not prevail and I was appointed to a tenure track post in January of 1982. I was also asked to join the History Workshop so once again had the good fortune to be at the heart of an important initiative in the making of history writing in South Africa.

The History Workshop has been credited in some accounts with an organisational and ideological coherence that it was far from having. It drew some of its inspiration from the British movement of the same name that Belinda Bozzoli and Charles van Onselen had encountered while in the UK. But the Wits workshop was a loose group of academics who came from a wide range of disciplines and held diverse political positions ranging, for example, from strong support for African nationalism to considerable scepticism. Some were comprehensively engaged with political and union movements while the primary focus of others was on their academic work.

We were all influenced by a context of resistance and revolt, which coloured our research interests and topics. But beyond that the main points of agreement were that it was a good idea to hold an interdisciplinary conference every three years and that it was important to make the new research available in accessible form to audiences outside of the university. We all agreed that it was important to counteract the then dominant narratives of South African history and that the experiences and struggles of ordinary people were an important focus of the activities of the Workshop. The 'view from below' was something of a mantra but it was far from the central focus of the research of all the members. A more accurate characterisation of a common project was the history of black South Africans previously neglected in the racially blinkered accounts of the past.

34 Bozzoli and Delius, 'Introduction', *Radical History Review*.

All the members of the Workshop had research projects and interests not captured within or determined by our engagement with the Workshop. In many instances they were shaped by intellectual and research trajectories that had long preceded its formation and, while not uninfluenced by it, were far from determined by it.

Belinda Bozzoli was the driving force in the activities of the Workshop and took on the arduous task of producing the edited collections that were drawn from the various conferences.³⁵ Belinda, a political scientist/sociologist by training, had a greater interest in and talent for theoretical disputation than many of the rest of us. As a result she put a powerful intellectual stamp on its work. The other members who were immersed in their own research projects agreed with some of what she said. But very few, if any of us, imagined that she was speaking on our behalf. We were mainly very grateful for, and admiring of, her role in building the profile of the Workshop. But it is a mistake to imagine that the History Workshop publications reflected a consensus view of the members. As Debbie Posel has pointed out, those who choose to read work of the core members – who changed over time – will find a wide range of interests and approaches.³⁶ Marginalised groups and the underclasses were an important focus but many of us were also steeped in the history of African kingdoms and chieftainship; forms of colonial government were just as likely to be topics of interest.³⁷ A deeply ingrained reflex was to attempt to analyse the local and regional processes of change in the context of wider economic and political dynamics. Eddie Webster was a sociologist with a strong interest in trade unions and the labour process.³⁸ Tom Lodge was a major contributor to the burgeoning literature on the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress.³⁹ They may have been politically marginalised at the time but they were at no risk of suffering the ‘condescension of posterity’.⁴⁰ Deborah Posel and Isabel Hofmeyr, who joined the Workshop in the 1980s, focused respectively on the nature of the apartheid state and on oral historical narratives.⁴¹ The major research focus of Jonathan Hyslop, who joined in 1987, was Bantu education.⁴²

The idea that the writings of Charles van Onselen and Belinda Bozzoli at this time represented or set the agenda of this wider group of academics ignores the differences and tensions with the group.⁴³ These divisions grew more acute and many of the founder members had faded into the background, or dropped out, by the mid-1980s. The History Workshop

35 B. Bozzoli, *Labour Townships and Protest* (Johannesburg, 1979); B. Bozzoli, *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal* (Johannesburg, 1983); B. Bozzoli, *Class Community and Conflict* (Johannesburg, 1987).

36 D. Posel, ‘Social history and the Wits history workshop’, *African Studies*, 69 (2010); see also P. Bonner, ‘Keynote address to the life after thirty colloquium’, *African Studies*, 69 (2010).

37 Philip Bonner was unusual in that he worked on both precolonial and more modern urban history. His involvement in the independent trade union movement strongly influenced his work and interests at this time.

38 E. Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould: Trade unionism and the Foundries* (Johannesburg, 1985) gives some sense of his interests at the time.

39 T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg, 1983).

40 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 12.

41 D. Posel, *The Making of Apartheid* (Oxford, 1991); I. Hofmeyr, *We Spend our Years as a Tale that is told: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom* (London, 1994).

42 J. Hyslop, *The Classroom Struggle: Policy and Resistance in South Africa, 1940–1990* (Pietermaritzburg, 1990). The above list of people and publications is far from complete. It is simply intended to give some sense of the interests of a range of people who were involved in the workshop in the 1980s and early 1990s.

43 It would also be a mistake to imagine that Belinda and Charles were always in full intellectual agreement!

was also one among many historical initiatives around the country, each of which had its own intellectual dynamics. All too often the term ‘social history’ is used to lump all of these initiatives together and then to assume there was a common agenda and methodology, illustrated by the work of a few prominent individuals and overemphasising the centrality of the History Workshop. The work of other historians is usually only referred to in order to reinforce this reductionist account and ignored when it is clearly at odds with it.⁴⁴ Rousseau’s suggestion that such lumping was legitimate because the members of the Workshop appeared happy ‘to let Bozzoli speak for them’ invites the obvious retort that all of us were producing substantial work in our own right at the time and imagined that any serious analysts would also engage with that.⁴⁵

One of the significant contributions made by the History Workshop was the widely shared and growing commitment of its members to find ways of making new research on southern African society more accessible to constituencies outside of the universities and the middle classes. It is often assumed that E. P. Thompson and the British History Workshop channelled by Charles van Onselen and Belinda Bozzoli played the key part in stimulating these initiatives. But while this was an element in the mix it was far from the dominant one. Two of the founder members of the Workshop – Eddie Webster and Philip Bonner – had a long history of involvement in worker education in support of the independent trades union movement that emerged in the aftermath of the 1973 strikes in South Africa. Their engagement made them acutely aware of the need to make revisionist perspectives on South Africa’s past more easily available to workers and others.

Another important element in our commitment to popularisation was the experience of prolonged fieldwork. Those of us who spent time interviewing in urban and rural areas were repeatedly challenged by people about what was going to happen to the information we were gathering. Would it disappear into university archives and only be made available in unreadable publications? How would they be able to access this material in the future? Who was making money from the information they gave? The activities of the Workshop provided us with one way to respond to these pressures and questions – if a highly imperfect one.

Wider attempts to create alternative educational resources also created a demand for new, more accessible histories. Luli Callinicos, a former teacher, played a key role in developing appropriate material with the support of a number of the members.⁴⁶

Organizations and media linked to the United Democratic Front and the plethora of NGOs that sprang up in the 1980s all contributed to the demand for historical material, some of which was supplied by academics and students linked to the History Workshop. Probably the most widely-read work we published at this time was in *Upbeat Magazine* and in a weekly column we produced for the *New Nation* newspaper. In both of these publications material produced by members of the History Workshop was merely one element; contributions were sourced from much wider networks.

44 For an especially egregious example of this approach, see G. Minkley and C. Rassol. ‘Orality, memory and social history in South Africa’, in S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee (eds.), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1988).

45 Quoted in Bonner, ‘Keynote address’, 16.

46 See, for example, Luli Callinicos, *Gold and Workers* (Johannesburg, 1981) and the numerous publications by her that followed.

The main focus of my research and writing in the 1980s was on the migrant-led Sekhukuneland Revolt of 1958 and increasingly on the youth revolt in the mid-1980s, which broke out as my research really got underway. The results appeared in a number of articles and finally in *A Lion amongst the Cattle*, which were rooted in intensive and prolonged oral research and repeated stays in the area.⁴⁷ I was also drawn into various educational and development projects in the region. As the composition of the student body at Wits started to change I taught more and more students from the region and a number of them assisted in the work. I remained wedded to an approach that stressed the importance of locating processes within a changing local and national political economy. My interviews, however, along with unfolding events – in particular the widespread witch killings – ensured that issues of culture and consciousness, along with the various ways in which my informants narrated and explained history, profoundly influenced my work. This approach also chimed with wider shifts in historical writing partly shaped by debates within the Oxford Group. Beinart and Bundy, for example, wrote in their introduction to *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa*:

The transformation involved must ultimately be viewed in its totality, but it is important to identify certain central aspects of change for the period under review. They were the entrenchment and deepening of labour migrancy; the diminishing ability of the majority of people to produce sufficient food for subsistence; the intensification of state control and constraints in everyday life; the limited but increasing spread of Christianity. Interwoven with these changes were the shifts in consciousness and ideology that we attempt to capture: How Transkeians identified themselves; how they viewed their relationships with others: how they perceived their interests and the possibility of action in pursuit of these; in short how they sought to comprehend and come to terms with their historical situation Popular consciousness evinced complex and contradictory forms. New ideas and ideologies were intertwined with old; [there was] an intricate imbrication of different vocabularies and symbols.⁴⁸

While not all of us engaged with the ‘right’ social anthropologists, there was also an ongoing dialogue between the work of some anthropologists and historians. Many of us had, from the outset of our research, wrestled with how to draw on the rich but not unproblematic insights of earlier generations, including luminaries such as Monica Hunter, Isaac Schapera, and the Kriges. But there was also cross fertilisation taking place in the 1970s and 1980s. Colin Murray was influential, especially in terms of family dynamics and bridewealth.⁴⁹ Then Mayers gathered a talented group of young researchers for projects on migrancy, which set out to historicise their earlier seminal work on migrant culture in both urban and rural contexts.⁵⁰ I began a dialogue with Deborah James at Wits, which over the years has ranged across many topics but was initially focused on ethnicity and female migrancy.⁵¹ The issue of gender was also highlighted by a number of other

47 P. Delius, *A Lion amongst the Cattle* (Johannesburg, 1996).

48 W. Beinart and C. Bundy, *Hidden Struggles in Rural South* (London, Berkeley, and Johannesburg, 1987) 2–3.

49 C. Murray, *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho* (Cambridge, 1981).

50 P. Mayer (ed.), *Black Villagers in an Industrial Society* (Cape Town, 1980).

51 D. James, *Songs of Women Migrants: Performance and Identity in South Africa* (London, 1999).

scholars with the work of Belinda Bozzoli being especially influential.⁵² Patrick Harries absorbed all of this and was also increasingly influenced by the insights provided by Clifford Geertz.⁵³ One of the key conclusions that emerged from my own work was the danger of creating units of study blinkered by distinctions between urban and rural life that underplayed the constant interplay between town and countryside. Most of us agreed that the increasing separation of the black population from the means of production was a process of fundamental importance. But few were confident that any concept of class provided the primary analytical category or could capture the complex processes of struggle and change.

CONCLUSION

In my view the way in which the category ‘social history’ has been used has obscured, rather than clarified, discussion. The term has been used by some historians in passing self-identification and by others as a loose description of a generation of more empirically oriented historians who gained some prominence in the 1980s. Most of us rarely used the terms ourselves or felt that it captured the essence of our approach. Indeed, in 1989 Belinda Bozzoli and I described it as a ‘misleading term’ when applied to the work of many of the revisionist historians⁵⁴ A great deal of work remains to be done before the term is either adopted or rejected as a label with any analytical value. The tendency to lump together a very diverse selection of historians under this rubric and then to characterise and/or critique this invented group in terms of selected writings by a prominent few with highly selective additions needs to be replaced by a much more rigorous analysis and classification. Perhaps the term ‘social historian’ does have some value in analysing South African historiography. But this needs to be demonstrated by an in-depth analysis of the influences on, and work of, many more historians than presently grace the footnotes of commentators.

The question remains why Thompson has been given such prominence in explaining shifts in historical writing in South Africa. This article makes no claim to provide a definitive answer. But recurring themes in the narrative are the dangers of simple diffusionist models that pay inadequate attention to local dynamics. The assumption that a reluctance to foreground prevalent theory means a lack of engagement with theory has also left its mark on historiographical overviews. Probably most important of all has been the influence of the common logical fallacy ‘*post hoc ergo propter hoc*’ – confusing chronological primacy and correlation with causation. Thompson certainly raised many of the issues addressed by the History Workshop and others long before we did but, as I have tried to demonstrate, this does not mean that his pre-occupations determined the ideas and initiatives of historians and activists in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. Their work was shaped by a much wider range of intellectual influences, lineages, and contexts.

52 B. Bozzoli, ‘Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies’, *Journal of South African Studies*, 9 (1983) and *Women of Phokeng* (Johannesburg, 1991).

53 P. Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity* (London, 1994).

54 Bozzoli and Delius, ‘Introduction’, *Radical History Review*.

There is no doubt that the work of E. P. Thompson influenced the evolution of historical writing on South Africa in the years between 1970 and 1990. But there is a danger of exaggerating its significance. It was often merely one element amongst many. In the early period of revisionist writing his work was more prominent in bibliographies than it was in the substance of research and argument. Many other influences shaped the research and writing of succeeding cohorts of historians. It is therefore profoundly misleading to periodise or account for shifts in historical writing and debate mainly in terms of Thompson's work. *The Poverty of Theory* was probably his most immediately influential publication, not because it initiated new forms of research and writing but because it (and the rejoinders from Anderson and others) provided additional ammunition for battles already well underway.⁵⁵ This is not to diminish the importance of his work in wider contexts or to deny that it had a decisive impact on the work of some scholars.

Some essays in Charles Van Onselen's evocative and influential studies of the early history of the Rand echo:

Thompson's invocation of the world of artisans on the edge of increased involvement with commodity production, the looming power of industrialization and the homogenization of work that was about to extinguish it, and the particular forms of politics that arise in such a context.⁵⁶

He also explicitly locates his work within 'social history'.⁵⁷ Keletso Atkins's account of time discipline amongst Zulu workers drew on and added new dimensions to both Thompson and van Onselen's treatment of the theme.⁵⁸ T. Dunbar Moodie made extremely fruitful use of Thompson's insights in his seminal work on the moral economy of mine workers while Patrick Harries recalls that he was initially strongly influenced by Thompson in his path-breaking study of migrant labour.⁵⁹ Perhaps least appreciated now is Thompson's contribution to the development of environmental history in South Africa. After reading *Whigs and Hunters*, Stanley Trapido wrote a pioneering paper on poaching in the Transvaal that was very widely read and presented at seminars but tragically never published. Amongst others it influenced William Beinart, a pioneer in the field of environmental history in southern Africa.⁶⁰ The other articles in this Forum suggest ways in which the work of Thompson has and can be drawn on to enrich research African history. While his influence on shifts in South African historiography in the past may have been exaggerated, it is clear that Thompson's scholarship and the debates it generates can remain a rich resource for historians for many years to come.

55 E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978).

56 F. Cooper, 'Work, class and empire: an African historian's retrospective on E. P. Thompson', *Social History*, 20:2 (1995), 237.

57 C. van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersand 1886-1914: New Babylon* (Johannesburg, 1982), 196.

58 K. E. Atkins, *The Moon Is Dead! Give Us Our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900* (London, 1993); Cooper, 'Work, class and empire', 236.

59 T. Dunbar Moodie, 'The moral economy of the black miners' strike of 1946', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 13 (1986); personal communication with Patrick Harries, Sept. 2015 and Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity*.

60 E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York, 1975); personal communication with W. Beinart, Oct. 2015; S. Trapido, 'Poachers, proletarians and gentry in the early twentieth-century Transvaal', unpublished paper given at the African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984.