

## **THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICA: “WE LIVE IN TRAGIC TIMES”**

### **Helena Pohlandt-McCormick**

University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis, Minnesota  
[pohla001@umn.edu](mailto:pohla001@umn.edu)

#### ***The Cambridge History of South Africa. Volume 1: From Early Times to 1885.***

Edited by Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard M. Mbenga, and Robert Ross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xviii + 480 pp. Figures. Maps. Contributors. Notes on Terminology. Notes. References. Index. \$120.00. Cloth.

#### ***The Cambridge History of South Africa. Volume 2: 1885–1994.***

Edited by Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager, and Bill Nasson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 650 pp. Contributors. Acknowledgments. Statistical Appendix. Bibliography. Index. \$165.00. Cloth.

If an archival discovery is the grand gesture of authority for the historian, the kind of text presented here as *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, with its sweeping synthesis from “early times” to 1994, is the grand gesture of authority for the discipline. The gift represented by these two volumes resembles the satisfaction we feel when we can stand atop a monument (or in this case, perhaps, what several authors in the volumes call the South African “miracle”) to look out at the horizon, take in the grand view, and then look back at where we have come from. In this case there is satisfaction in being able to hold in our hands, in two substantial and dense volumes, the “complete” history of South Africa—if not a “master narrative,” at least “a reasonable summation of the current state of knowledge” (vol. 1, xiv). In this, the *Cambridge History of South Africa* is true to its goal, of producing “broad essays that cover a given field of history at any given point and that serve as a starting point for those who need to gain access to the established historical scholarship on a given country or field of inquiry” (vol. 2, 1).

The *Cambridge History* is an authoritative, coherent, and comprehensive account which, in the arrangement of its chapters, follows a rough chronological outline (with many detours). It rejects a teleological reading of apartheid and colonialism more broadly as a tale foretold and, at least to a certain extent, takes account of the unevenness, complexity, and ambiguity of history. With some exceptions, however (in essays, for example, by Paul Landau, Tlhalo Radithlahlo, and Deborah Posel), it remains firmly grounded in what the editors of the second volume call “one of the most dynamic and innovative fields of African historical scholarship”: the social

history “produced by so-called radical or revisionist historians in the twentieth century (vol. 2, 1). Paul Landau reads the archive less as a source than as a grid of intelligibility for meaning, consciousness, and practices in a changing world; Tlhalo Radithlahlo engages with the archive of the unexpected by bringing into play the field of cultural production and aesthetics; and Deborah Posel reads apartheid’s articulation with the concepts of modernity, knowledge production, and (Foucault’s) concepts of biopolitics and genealogy.

The editorial decision to limit the geographical reach of these volumes to “South Africa” and to end them in 1994 is explained, somewhat inadequately, by the unifying context of white domination. Two major lacunae are its consequence. One is the absence of Namibia, whose history was deeply entangled with that of South Africa throughout the twentieth century and arguably remains so. In fact, one of the most egregious and perhaps symptomatic errors in these unevenly edited volumes is the misspelling of the sole reference to Namibia (“Nambia”), which appears in the index of volume 2—a blunder that is evocative of the exclusion of South Africa’s dependent territory from the geographical boundaries the *Cambridge History* sets itself. The other is the absence of new historiographies (“as yet there have been limited signs of a blooming of new historiographies” [vol. 2, xiv]). The 1994 cut-off point not only ends the historical account there, but also (clearly uneasily, in the case of several of the contributors) avoids the inclusion of the considerable historiographical work since the early 1990s that has not only addressed the “legacies” of apartheid and colonialism, but has also called into question the very basis of the concepts, chronologies, and turning points that are assumed here to be, in the words of David Scott (2004:3), the “stable ground of explication and justification.”

These volumes take their place in a long line of synthetic histories of South Africa—some of them prestigious, some of them notorious, but all claiming to be authoritative. How influential such syntheses have been is open to question, but the question itself is indicative of the important relationship between history and historiography. The production of such a synthesis is an endeavor that is fraught with immense responsibility, and so we must ask what these volumes reveal, as well as what remains unexplored or unthought—and at what cost. These are questions that have never been more salient than at the present juncture.

The *Cambridge History of South Africa* was “conceived and written well after 1994[,]. . . the post-apartheid moment of South African history” (vol. 1, xiii). In the context of a certain unease with the postapartheid present, its publication provides a timely opportunity to think about whether the work of history might itself make a difference as we contemplate the legacies of apartheid and colonial authoritarianism. If one of the challenges posed to history after apartheid is to disentangle the complicity of historical knowledge in the exercise of power (see Lalu 2009:26)—a phenomenon carefully chronicled by the editors’ opening chapter to volume 1 and elabo-

rated in other chapters—then it behooves the practitioners of history to consider their own role in the production of history and also to think how this will serve the teaching of history.

Much has changed in South Africa since 1994, but social inequality has increased and racial formations and habits of mind persist in the face of the continued catastrophes of poverty, neoliberal global economics, and HIV/AIDS. As Scott has argued, “we live in tragic times”:

The old languages of moral-political vision and hope are no longer in sync with the world they were meant to describe and normatively criticize. . . . What is at stake in critically thinking through this postcolonial present is not simply the naming of yet another horizon, and the fixing of the teleological plot that takes us there from here, . . . [but] something like a refusal to be seduced and immobilized by the facile normalization of the present. (2004:2)

Might we not, accordingly, ask what it would mean to take seriously the editors’ own anxieties and cautionary notes: about the concept of “history” and “the limits of the extension of the term ‘history,’ the issue of its form . . . , and the possible notions of time it may encompass” (vol. 1, 8); about the historicist assumptions inherent in our language and our grammar: “We are alert to the possibility that such a term can be read as suggesting a teleological approach or as a signal of an evolutionary view, in terms of which ‘preindustrial’ might be read as connoting ‘not yet’ industrial” (vol. 1, xii); and even, self-consciously, about its own claims to authority: “How can the history of the new South Africa be represented in what might be described as an imperialist, even a settler, format?” (vol. 1, xiv)? The limitations of even these anxieties are immediately apparent. “To signal our awareness of these possible meanings of the term [‘preindustrial’],” the editors write, “we have elected to use the term without its customary hyphenation. We do the same with regard to the term ‘precolonial’ for the same reason” (vol. 1, xii). But they do not extend the same caution to the term “post-apartheid” (vol. 1, xiii), and it is precisely “post-apartheid” that presents the deepest challenge to the volumes at hand.

If we ask what role history and historians might play in thinking South Africa’s way out of the predicaments of the present, what Grundlingh et al. dismiss as the “more extreme reifications of the ‘textual turn’ within the discipline” (vol. 2, 601) could provide some suggestive answers. In the past twenty years several scholars of South African history have grappled with their own apprehensions that the failures inherent in the discipline may have been complicit in holding up the structures and thinking of apartheid and may therefore have shaped our understanding of the past. This notion has not been a simplistic rejection of history or a simple plea to move beyond the apartheid past and to let bygones be bygones. Nor is it a reflection of an inflated sense of importance on the part of historians or

the discipline. Instead, it questions the modes of knowing that are at the heart of history's disciplinary reason and method, and considers the possibility that the transformation in South Africa remains incomplete precisely because political and juridical changes are not matched by a sufficiently self-reflective transformation of historical consciousness. This is particularly true for the generation of historians who share an association with the anti-apartheid struggle through the undeniable vitality of radical and social history, but who have not sufficiently questioned the disciplinary and institutional structures of exclusion and rigidity that continue to haunt the disciplines and the university in South Africa.

It is not sufficient to mark "where the hiatuses in the historiography of South Africa lie," and to "facilitate in the creation of new agendas for moving that research into places that, as yet, we cannot imagine" (vol. 1, xiv–xv). The postcolonial critique of earlier scholarship is usually that it provided bad answers to good questions; that it was uncritical in its acceptance of categories like nation, race, identity, and above all, history as "a stable ground of explication and justification"; and that it was empiricist and historicist, trapped in a developmentalist mode of thinking about modernity and progress. Along with David Scott, I want to suggest that it may be more productive to rethink our questions (about the postcolonial or anticolonial nationalist past, among others) rather than try to provide authoritative answers. Herein also lie the pedagogical challenge and responsibility that a work such as the *Cambridge History* must live up to.

"The entry of Africans in the historical profession," the editors lament, "has been, and continues to be, slow, as a result of both pre-1994 restrictions and of post-1994 market opportunities, with significant consequences for the way in which South Africa history has been written" (vol. 2, 12). As an outside examiner on a number of Ph.D. theses, I have had the opportunity in recent years to read the excellent work of several young (South) African scholars. Even if, as the editors suggest, the inclusion of recent scholarship in these two volumes was not possible as a consequence of the 1994 cut-off, the unwillingness to take account of the interventions of younger scholars is troubling. Many of these younger scholars have themselves taken up important debates in feminism and the broader issues in the humanities, raising questions not just about inclusion and exclusion, but also about the tole of the humanities in academic discourse and in the exercise of power (see Butler 2011). One wonders what a young scholar from Fort Hare, or (if I might be permitted to briefly take the view from far across the Atlantic Ocean) a young American student, would think as they read these books. The former certainly are the "future historians" invoked here (vol. 2, 14) and they would be justifiably puzzled, first by the absence of their intellectual questions, and second by the absence of a sense of the intensity of the debate about the blurring of the lines between history and historiography and the sharp critique of radical social history in which they

were presumably schooled (see, among others, Minkley & Rassool 1998; Rousseau 1994). The dynamism and innovation once attributed to radical or revisionist social history now rings hollow, but the discursive muting of the intensity of these debates is also perilous, perhaps even more so.

One example will suffice here: what is an all-too-brief reference to “South Africa’s increasingly corporate academia” (vol. 2, 606) has in fact produced a critical and urgent debate about the contracts between the universities and the state, and the implications of the corporatization of the university (a phenomenon not unique to South Africa) for higher education and its research priorities, especially in the humanities. Scholars and activists in South Africa, including radical social historians, took upon themselves a considerable responsibility in contributing to the ending of apartheid in their critically important analyses of the deep structural and methodical effects of racism as well as racism’s unconscious formations and legacies. But if we seek only the technological, biological, political, and juridical solutions to these problems that are common for a state focused on development (as well as necessary, given the urgent challenges of poverty and HIV/AIDS in South Africa), we ignore the disheartening limitations of these approaches and fail, as teachers and scholars, to nurture the historical reflection and reasoning that can help us think our way out of the predicaments of the present. The work of history, but particularly of historiography, is critical here and not simply, as Adam Sitze has recently pointed out, “just one among many domains of knowledge.”

It’s that specific sort of knowledge that allows us to become self-conscious about the way we pose and adjudicate the very questions of continuity and discontinuity in the first place. Especially in a situation of political and juridical transformation, *this sort of knowledge is indispensable: it’s the condition of possibility* for any self-conscious discussion of what it might mean for South African law and politics to become “post-apartheid”. . . . *To lack it is to enter into the events of political and juridical transformation unaware and unprepared* [my emphasis]. (2012:3)

This thinking, of course, has implications that go beyond the geohistorical particulars of South Africa. It is also the place where South African history at this particular conjuncture (“the postapartheid moment of South African history,” which is not simply or literally the period of time after apartheid, but rather the engagement with and contestation of apartheid’s discourses, archives, power structures, and social hierarchies, a new conceptual apparatus informed by the theoretical questions posed by poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and subaltern studies) stands to make one of its most important contributions. It is therefore an opportunity by-passed in these volumes, with their insistence on the primacy of social history, their neglect of the kinds of challenges to assumptions about the relations between his-

tory and historiography that have been posed elsewhere, and their failure to allow for the possibility that disciplinary historiography everywhere operates by reason of colonial categories and techniques.

## References

- Butler, Judith. 2011. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Lalu, Premesh. 2009. *Deaths of Hintsa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Minkley, Gary, and Ciraj Rassool. 1998. "Orality, Memory and Social History in South Africa." In *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, edited by Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, 89–99. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rousseau, Nicky. 1994. "Popular History in South Africa in the 1980s." M.A. thesis, University of the Western Cape.
- Scott, David. 2004. *Conscripts of Modernity*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Sitze, Adam. 2012. "History and Desire." *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 13 (1–2).