SCIENCE AND NATIONALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

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A Commonwealth of Knowledge. Science, Sensibility, and White South Africa 1820–2000. By SAUL DUBOW. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xi + 296. $60 (ISBN 0-19-929663-4).

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Saul Dubow is a very prolific historian. This book is the latest in a number of works he has devoted to South African intellectual history. His monographs and articles are evidence that it is worth studying intellectual history at a time when historiography has largely moved into the fields of social and cultural history. Dubow's interests lie in the fields of the history of ideas and ideologies as well as in the history of science. The book under review falls into the last category and is a follow-up and an extension of his well-known book on *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa*. Yet in this new publication he shifts emphasis, when he connects the history of science to an emerging nationalism. In his opinion white South Africanism was a viable alternative to the triumphant cultural nationalisms but it has usually been neglected by historians. His writing stands outside the mainstream in two other respects as well: he attempts to set a counterweight against, or at least provide a complementary approach to, the dominant 'history from below'. And he aims at querying, at a historiographical level, the economic and political predominancy of the northern provinces by emphasizing the tradition of the Cape and of Cape Town, the city where he grew up (p. 121). The book consists of six chapters in chronological order. The first chapter describes the growth of self-confidence amongst an emergent Anglo-Dutch colonial elite in the early nineteenth century. This elite combined scientific interests with antiquarian predilection for collecting specimens and objects. This newly won self-confidence provided the white colonial population with the stamina to resist autocratic governors like Lord Somerset. This resistence grew into a general defence against imperial intervention of all matters that were perceived as internal to the Cape Colony. The culmination and success of this development came with the implementation of a parliamentary system in Cape Town in 1853. On the other hand, this educated elite's need for social distinction and status transformed itself into racist exclusiveness during the same period.

Dubow's approach is not without pitfalls, for instance when he depicts John Fairbairn as a 'proto-colonial nationalist' (pp. 28 and 55). The perspective of the book as a whole develops a teleological twist, as if the antiquarian interest in the country's past or the leisurely involvement in botanical or zoological research predetermined the emergence of nationalism. But nationalism is certainly not the telos of history nor is it the highest intellectual achievement. It is merely an ideology with a certain function and political applicability. Interested groups fabricate it, but it is not the natural outcome of the growth of knowledge. To be fair, Dubow does not say that it is, but his book can be read as if the author suggests an interpretation along those lines.

The *Cape Monthly Magazine* is at the focus of the second chapter. It was a general magazine containing a large variety of scientific topics as well as political opinions. Dubow is interested in the magazine's role as a multiplicator that disseminated knowledge and organized research. The self-confidence of the white elite became rooted in scientific achievements and in a range of educational and cultural institutions which are still grouped around the Company Garden in Cape Town. Together with the parliament buildings, they constitute the very city centre and give structure to urban space. When education and political power almost

coincide, then science is not politically neutral or innocent – this is one of the most important messages of this book.

Dubow identifies a colonial nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, referring to Richard Jebb's concept of this. From 1910 onwards, 'colonial nationalism' transformed itself into a 'white South Africanism', the topic of the third chapter. It deals with the transition period between 1872 and the unification of South Africa. South Africa's position in the British Empire, constitutionalism and legal thought are therefore in the limelight. After unification the role of science became even more decisive since planning moved centre-stage in politics and administration. Therefore, the fourth chapter looks into the way science shaped white South Africanism and the way newly founded institutions and associations were linked to the project of creating a white nation. During this period the contrast between north and south became pronounced, with the Transvaal as the more authoritarian centre of power whereas the Cape stood for liberal traditions.

The period after the First World War saw 'White South Africanism' at its zenith. This period of triumph manifested itself in a whole range of newly founded national institutions. It was the time of unmitigated success for the United Party, it was the era of Hertzog and Smuts, it was also a time of intensified segregation and a boom period for racist concepts in science and education. Public discourses centred mainly around white poverty, which provided Afrikaner nationalism with a major impulse for political mass mobilization. The sixth chapter, modestly entitled 'Conclusion', is much more than this, since it reveals important continuities in the history of science during the apartheid years and beyond. It throws light on new impulses which influenced the 1950s and 1960s. This chapter contains a wealth of interesting details and a lot of material on South African intellectual history during the apartheid decades, which has never before been brought together in a single book. In particular, what Dubow has to say about 'Apartheid Science' (pp. 252–68) is of great importance and provides new insights into the working of institutions as well as the interdependence of science and political planning. The biographical information about people is just as revealing as the interconnections between institutions in South Africa and worldwide.

A Commonwealth of Knowledge is much more than a mere synthesis since Dubow sheds new light on interconnections and contexts. Only an author like him who is able to cover such a broad range of historical interests, and who over the years collected such an immense and impressive knowledge about details and contexts, could write a book like this. Dubow's new approach, to look at the history of nationalism from the perspective of a history of science and knowledge, is fruitful but it has some disadvantages, too. Because he concentrates on the history of 'White South Africanism', black scientists and scholars are too underrepresented for this book to be a comprehensive history of science. It must be read in the way the author intended it – namely, as a history of science in the light of an experiment in nation building. In the first chapters it sometimes shows a tendency to reproduce the impression that nationalism is something which is historically necessary. Nevertheless, Dubow's book shows how an approach that does not follow the mainstream and does not bother too much about political correctness can provide stimulating insights.

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