



FAULT A PRIMER ON RACE, SCIENCE AND SOCIETY LINES

EDITORS

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Pitfalls of a Profession

Afrikaner historians and the notion of an “objective-scientific” approach in perspective

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“Volksgeskiedenis” and academe

From about the 1930s until late into the twentieth century, professional historical writing in Afrikaner circles was closely linked to the universities, and the universities in turn played a significant role in promoting the wider nationalist enterprise. History was regarded as a crucial discipline: the past was needed to legitimate the present. In an influential text written in 1941 on Afrikaans universities, the importance of the past was emphasised in near-religious terms: the “calling” and “destination” of the Afrikaner people were predetermined by their past and the “volk” therefore had a duty to honour and obey the sanctity of that past.¹

“Volksgeskiedenis” was marked by certain characteristics. It was a history infused with romantic notions of God-fearing, intrepid nineteenth-century pioneers, great visionary leaders and loyal followers who, despite trials and tribulations, established a “civilised” form of government in the interior and “tamed” the land. It was a form of history that stood in contrast to the prevailing imperialist view of the time, in which South Africa only featured as part of the British Empire, or the emerging liberal perspective that had a more composite interpretation of South Africa’s past.

The Department of History at Stellenbosch University assumed a central role in providing credence to history as an academic discipline, without questioning the main tenets of “volksgeskiedenis”. Particularly adept at maintaining a symbiotic

relationship between the demands of academe and the demands of the “volk” was Professor H.B. Thom, who headed the department between 1937 and 1954 and then became rector of the University.

During these crucial years of rampant Afrikaner nationalism, Thom was not a rabble-rousing propagator of Afrikaner history; on the contrary, in the more sedate style of the Cape Afrikaner, he promoted the linkages between the “volk” and their “true” past in a sober, calm, dignified and even detached manner. He was considered the ideal Afrikaans aristocrat and scholar, one who could skilfully blend nationalist cultural and political life and academe into one harmonious whole. His *magnum opus*, a biography of the Voortrekker leader Gerrit Maritz, which appeared in 1947, was viewed as an eminently successful synthesis of “volksgeskiedenis” and academic demands.²

Thom’s achievement was not without implications for Afrikaans historical writing as a political discourse. He believed that the “main aim” of history was “to search for the truth in an honest way, and to keep that aim pure, but at the same time ... to do that in the midst of the “volk”.”³

The possibility that the “truth” might be found outside the closed circle of the “volk” was not really a consideration that merited serious attention. Provided one’s research had been thorough enough, the “facts” themselves, without any embellishment, would reinforce and strengthen the case of the “volk”.

Thom’s influence radiated far and wide. After 1948, virtually every Afrikaans history department in the country, as well as the bilingual departments of what was the University of Port Elizabeth and the University of South Africa, employed former Stellenbosch graduates, often in leading positions. His views, in a truncated and at times in more robust form, were propagated by some of his acolytes.

The role played by Afrikaner nationalist historians is not unique; invariably in countries involved in nation-building exercises, historians are given to indulging in exaggerated patriotic myth-making. Specifically in Africa, it represented the kind of historiography that reigned supreme in the aftermath of the colonial era. Nationalist historiography in newly independent countries often served the interests of the postcolonial state, and the rediscovery of African history, as opposed to its earlier denial in the colonial period, was often accompanied by the political processes of nation-building. In both South African and African historiography more broadly, this approach had an attenuating effect on the study and understanding of the past. Writing about African historiography, Caroline Neale has remarked:

To some [historians] it now seems regrettable, both from a political point of view in that it [nationalist history] served the interest of new regimes which in

hindsight were not what historians hoped they would be, and from an intellectual point of view, in that historians concentrated on narrowly political themes at the expense of social and economic ones.⁴

In current South Africa, the same trend can be observed with the historical projection of the African National Congress as the prime, if not the only, liberator of the country. A new mythology has arisen of an all-conquering movement that almost single-handedly delivered South Africa from apartheid and that therefore must be trusted in building a new nation. Despite the party's numerous moral failures and other shortcomings, it still lays claim to this constructed historical preeminence. A dominant African nationalism, it has recently been argued, has society in its grip: "It is here that the society finds itself pinned down, captured, trapped in an especially powerful form of hegemony."⁵ The ramifications of this, albeit of a different order qualitatively perhaps, may yet turn out to be no less dangerous than a virulent Afrikaner nationalism was in the previous century.

The mantra of "objective-scientific" history

Unpacking the specific dynamics of African nationalism in this country, and the structural elements underpinning its historical discourse, is a task that still needs to be undertaken. As far as Afrikaner nationalist history, the object of this chapter, is concerned, the question is much the same: how was a nationalist history paraded with authority in academe?

In Afrikaans historical writing, the terms "objective" and "scientific" were often linked, hence the hyphenated form. It was under the aegis of "objectivity" that historical writing had to be disciplined in order to conform to the dictates and demands of a "science". The two concepts were thus often used in tandem.

Not surprisingly, it was at Stellenbosch University that the notion of "objective-scientific" history was emphasised, propagated and transmitted further afield. With some justification, the History Department could claim in 1969 that it had a "famous tradition" in this respect. It was a source of great pride that Stellenbosch was responsible for laying the foundations of the "new tradition in South Africa of thorough archival research and objective, critical judgement of the facts".⁶

One of the earliest expressions of the "objective-scientific" ideal in Afrikaans was that of S.F.N. Gie, the first professor of South African history at Stellenbosch, from 1918 to 1926. Addressing a student society in 1920, Gie accentuated an "honest and objective" attitude as an essential requirement for the "scientific" historian. These intellectual qualities, Gie argued, could only be gained through "hard work and experience" in dealing with the subject.⁷

Some 15 years later, J.A. Wiid, Gie's successor in South African history, endorsed much the same view. He did admit, though, that complete objectivity was not possible and that "subjective" factors would always intrude. Nevertheless, this should not deter the historian from striving towards objectivity.⁸ Taken at face value, this statement seemed reasonable enough, but the built-in contradiction – how to achieve something that cannot be achieved – was never confronted. This point of departure also had other implications. Under the guise of "unavoidable subjective factors", various versions of "volksgeskiedenis", as long as they were not openly propagandist, could receive authoritative approval as acceptable "scientific" history. This left the door open for "objective-scientific" history to collapse into "volksgeskiedenis". Hermann Giliomee, one of the more thoughtful lecturers in the department in the 1970s and early 1980s, picked up on this and explained later:

The major lesson I learnt at Stellenbosch is that the writing of history is only of value when one tries one's utmost to establish the truth and does not attempt to put the truth at the service of a particular political ideal. I felt, however, that at Stellenbosch the "objective-scientific" method had become a fetish that created the illusion on the part of some that they were recording history impartially.⁹

The idea of "objective" scientific history in Stellenbosch and elsewhere had gradually assumed the status of holy writ and it cast a powerful spell. In the late 1980s, this notion was still billed as a "fundamental principle".¹⁰

The enmeshment of "objective-scientific" history and "volksgeskiedenis" meant that politically and socially conditioned values were relatively easily accommodated. In turn, these factors also influenced the internal structure of the discipline itself, such as the loci of power within it, research priorities, the division and allocation of resources, career patterns and advancement, decisions on what to publish and the reception of publications. The knowledge generated in this way cannot be seen as separate from the process through which it has been forged.

For Afrikaans historians, the ideal of "objective-scientific" history came to constitute a defence against any form of history seen to undermine their view of the past. Other histories were politically inspired, but history as written by Afrikaans professionals, so it was claimed, rose above politics, because it was "objective" and "scientific". The belief in the superiority of their "apolitical" position was firm and it was regarded as a neutral counterpoint to any form of ideological historical writing. There was little realisation that "objective-scientific" history was itself a political project imbued with conservative notions.

Implications

One of the implications of the emphasis on “objective-scientific” history is that it encouraged conformity and consensus, reducing the potential for conflict over substantial matters of interpretation. Those who dared to pursue themes considered unorthodox or controversial by the establishment could easily fall foul of accusations that their research might compromise the sacred tenets of the profession. “Objectivity”, in fact, was “valued not as the outcome of professional conflict, but as a prophylactic against it”.¹¹

An example of this was the way in which Thom, in 1940, reviewed a book by J.S. Marais, at the time from the University of Cape Town, on the Cape “coloured” people from 1652 to 1937.¹² Thom had little to say about the importance of the topic, the contribution (or otherwise) of the book to existing knowledge, the ideas and issues it raised and the possible new avenues of research it opened. He preferred instead to judge the book on what he regarded as “objective-scientific” criteria. Whereas Marais was fairly critical of the way in which Boers had treated “coloureds” in the nineteenth century and earlier, Thom did his best to exonerate the Boers on “scientific” grounds. This was not an isolated case. In an address given in 1943, Thom generally took English-speaking historians to task for not being “objective” enough in their writing.¹³

A further ramification of this line of approach is that it impacted on the choice of themes to be researched. The history of political parties and related subjects, as well as particular biographical studies, were the staple diet of most Afrikaner historians. Although such themes are to be found in virtually any historiographical tradition, in the case of Afrikaans-speaking historians, they supplanted almost any other form of historiography. In addition, the topics were usually exceedingly narrowly conceived; politics were simply politics and socioeconomic influences had little, or no, relation to politics. This promoted a certain degree of rigidity, as well as a lack of context; technically speaking, many of the works were impeccable, but in terms of a conceptual understanding of the motivations of the complex South African past, they had little to offer. In fact, an eminent, if at times somewhat erratic, Afrikaans historian was correct when he asserted late in life: “The Afrikaner form of historiography was elitist, personality-bound, idealistic, qualitative and narrative-bound – as if history was solely and merely aimed at the exercising of political power by the state.”¹⁴

There were also other, wider conceptual issues at stake. In essence, it meant that a nationalistic paradigm was diametrically opposed to the basic conceptualisation, nature and aims of a more class-based social history. Whereas nationalist historiography

emphasises ethnic or national unity, class conflict and division are of importance to the social historian; where party politics, official state policy and constitutional issues are regarded in nationalistic historiography as a natural given, the social historian questions the nature and function of these institutions and structures in the particular developmental stages of capitalism; and where the focus of nationalistic historiography is on great leaders and the utterances of politicians, the social historian concentrates to a large extent on the way in which “ordinary people” experienced certain historical events and processes. Social history also usually has an oppositional character, while nationalistic historiography tends to confirm to the status quo.

An additional complication is the adoption, without due reflection, of key categories emanating from a nationalist discourse. Racial and ethnic conceptualisations often rule in such expositions, and they do not usually allow for much class analysis, but tend to reify and extend the analytical purchase of such inherited approaches. In South Africa, this kind of baggage makes it more difficult to move into new areas of exploration.

Ideally, the evaluation of a final research product would come back to its original conceptualisation and to an appreciation of the selection of interpretive principles that go beyond the conventional historical evidence itself. To think otherwise can lead to dangerous distortions. Having said that, though, it is equally necessary to enter a caveat. Once the facts have been apprehended, one should also be aware that there are other facts which still roam free, and that these should at times be harnessed in order to run one’s narrative against the grain. Runaway relativism can be just as dangerous as narrow empiricism.

In the final reckoning, the *Sport Science* article fell prey not so much to slovenly empirical research, but to misleading assumptions about “objective” science. Viewed from the vantage point of the preoccupations that influenced Afrikaner historiography for a considerable period, this does not seem all that strange. The “politics of research” passed both sets of researchers by, either deliberately, or perhaps unwittingly so. What is called for is a recognition of, and ideally a promotion of, the “notion of the mutually provocative interaction between theoretical questioning and research having an empirical and historical dimension”.¹⁵

Endnotes

- 1 T.J. Hugo, *Die Afrikaanse Universiteit en Sy Taak in die Volkslewe*, ed. J. de W. Keyter, Die tweede trek-reeks no. 14 (Bloemfontein: Nasionale Pers, 1941), 116.
 - 2 Floris Albertus van Jaarsveld, *Die Afrikaners se Groot Trek na die Stede, En Ander Opstelle* (Johannesburg: Perskor, 1982), 271.
 - 3 Hendrik Bernardus Thom, “Die Huidige Stand van Historiese Navorsing in Suid-Afrika”, *Die Stellenbosche Oudstudent*, April 1943, 18.
 - 4 Caroline Neale, “The Idea of Progress in the Revision of African History, 1960-1970”, In *African Historiographies: What History for Which Africa*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David S. Newbury (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1986), 120-21.
 - 5 Belinda Bozzoli, “The Janus Face of African Nationalism Today”, *Politicsweb*, 17 February 2019, 2, <https://bit.ly/37cI7EA>; See also Francis Meli, *South Africa Belongs to Us: A History of the ANC* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1988).
 - 6 D.J. Kotzé, *Professor H.B. Thom* (Stellenbosch: Die Universiteit, 1969), 17.
 - 7 Stefanus Francois Naudé Gie, “Gesiedenis as Wetenskap”, *Die Huisgenoot*, October 1920, 254.
 - 8 J.A. Wiid, “Subjektiewe Faktore in die Geskiedskrywing”, *Stellenbosche Oudstudent*, April 1935, 19-22.
 - 9 Hermann Giliomee, *Hermann Giliomee, Historian: An Autobiography* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2016), 58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zkjzr0>
 - 10 D.J. van Zyl, “Gesiedenis as Vak en Wetenskap: Nuwe Uitdagings”, *South African Historical Journal* 19, no. 1 (1987): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582478708671619>
 - 11 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511816345>
 - 12 Hendrik Bernardus Thom, “Afkoms van die Kleurlinge: ’n ‘Wetenskaplike’ Studie Wat Soms Baie Subjektief Is”, *Die Huisgenoot*, 5 April 1940, 41.
 - 13 Thom, “Die Huidige Stand van Historiese Navorsing in Suid-Afrika”, 17.
 - 14 Floris Albertus van Jaarsveld, “Politieke Gesiedenis uit Ballingskap Herroep” (Unpublished Paper, 1991), 10.
 - 15 Dominick LaCapra, “From What Subject-Position(s) Should One Address the Politics of Research?”, In *The Politics of Research*, ed. Elizabeth Ann Kaplan (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 68.
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