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THE MAKING OF CLASS

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POPULARISING HISTORY : SOME REFLECTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

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(appendix to follow)

That history is not a neutral discipline, is confirmed in periods of great historical stress and change. In periods where large masses of the oppressed themselves become involved in historical actions, the limitations of conventional academic history become even more acute. The dominant historical discourse is unable to provide answers to questions which are suddenly generalised as part of a critical and creative upsurge on the part of the active mass. History is called upon to directly service the ongoing drive, and increasingly conscious interventions, of the masses in the creation of the new society.

The answers to the questions, "How did we get here?" "Where are we going?", require changes - not only in the content of dominant history, or at least in its emphases, but also in the method of history - for the crucial issue becomes one of accessibility. History becomes more than a discipline: it must intervene in pedagogy and in politics in a qualitatively new way. At the same time, the very power of the historical dimension, itself, and the specifics of its insights, may be used to broaden the narrowly political; this aspect should not be lost.

In other words, by facing the challenges of a popular history, we can immensely enrich history as a discipline, its relevance and meaning. Indeed, we give a truer meaning to history as a process, as a "dialogue between present and past", and as an active factor in a creative and questioning thrust that takes a society-wide form, rather than a narrow and elitist bent. Popular history is not "hack history", but provides potential to greatly breathe life into what might otherwise be a dusty and limited endeavour.

This paper looks at a limited number of experiences of popularising and

teaching history, with a range of participants broadly active in so-called community or extra-parliamentary politics. I hope to discuss the content of these courses as well as, more importantly, to establish some general principles and methodology for this kind of teaching. While little original material was used in researching for the various courses (there being a growing and extensive body of radical historiography which could be drawn upon), it was necessary to develop accessible resources in the process of teaching. One of the purposes of this paper, then, would also be to encourage the process of resource production. More generally, though, I hope to stimulate an interest and support for the relevance of popularising history : while this cannot supplant traditional academic modes of historical research and debate, I hope it will become clear that criteria of "academic excellence" are, perhaps, only secondary to the task of integrating a historical consciousness in the daily lives of the oppressed majority.

THE COURSE

The central course from which I draw lessons was a 10-session course, run under the auspices of the Extra-mural Studies Department at the University of Cape Town, from April to June 1984. The course examined selected themes in South African history, concentrating on economic, political and social developments in the growth of modern capitalism. There were approximately 15 participants on the course, although numbers dwindled to a core of about 8 to 10 people. They were chosen in consultation with local community organisations, to ensure that there was some consistency in the level of understanding, as well as to ensure that any benefits of the course would become a social - rather than a purely individual - asset. (This was a central theme of the course - that knowledge is social property). Course

participants included youth, women, civic and trade union activists, both male and female, from Coloured and African areas : this diversity was a strength in terms of course presentation and method. What bound most of the people together was a common experience of involvement in democratic organisation over a period of time, and a feeling by themselves or their organisations that they were ripe for a more theoretical elaboration and understanding of the concrete experiences which they had gained to date. Elements, or parts of the course, have subsequently been presented in a range of situations : from training worker-organisers on a CUPC course, to a grouping of women, youth and civic activists in Atlantis; as part of a course for UDF regional organisers; to a large group of striking shop workers; to youth groups in Mitchells Plain. In all the latter cases, the South African history packages presented were only an aspect of wider training courses, whether more or less intensive; but in all cases it was felt that this component formed an important part of "opening the eyes" and perceptions of participants.

AIMS

Why teach history in such a situation? It was felt that a study of their own past could broaden the perspectives of the participants in a number of beneficial ways.

Firstly, it was hoped to show that the current possibilities for change are, in fact, the norm of society : history is precisely about development and motion. While we might be living through a particularly acute situation, it is useful to see this with a longer view. History, in this way, could thus help to place and situate participants, as products of processes - as people with roots. In this way, too, history plays a role

in sharpening the contemporary analytical skills of course participants, enabling them to identify key strands or specific points for more effective intervention. Lessons of the past, mistakes and strengths, are made subject to critical assessment so that they may be applied to a present-day situation. In turn, the parameters and features of the present may be more keenly appreciated.

This is also not a purely intellectual process, but in a way develops people's own sense of commitment by enabling them to see themselves as bearers of specific traditions, thus as carrying historical responsibility. There is also a sense of pride in the very real achievements of previous struggles of the oppressed. This commitment is strengthened in another, perhaps more subtle, way. By learning the history of the oppressed, which has on the whole been hidden from them, participants develop an understanding of ideology, indeed, perhaps even an outrage: "Why have we been lied to all these years? Why have these things been kept from us?"

There is another level, too, at which ideology is laid bare, and this is around the issue of education itself. History, in most people's experience, has been boring and uninspiring. Further, they have been led to believe that the fault lies with themselves. Now a history is presented which is exciting, that is relevant and actually draws on their own resources and experiences (as we shall see later), to provide answers to past and present issues. Theory is made accessible. This is a challenge to notions of education in which the learner is a simple receptacle and the teacher has a monopoly of skills and knowledge. The method of teaching history, then, is also geared to restoring the self-confidence and pride of oppressed people, whom historical forces have tended to subject and cow.

A last aim of the courses, no less important, was also to use the opportunity to encourage particular group dynamics. If history can be a weapon of the oppressed, then course participants have particular responsibilities. In the immediate context, they need to develop skills of listening and to contribute to discussion in a constructive way - of ensuring that their own learning does not happen at the expense of others. More generally, they need to understand that any insights they gain are not their own property. They, in turn, have a responsibility to assist others to learn, to pass on their knowledge, and to ensure that, in this way, they are contributing to making a new and different kind of history.

METHOD

It is clear, then, that the method of presentation would have to be substantially different from a lecture-type situation, or from a reliance on book-learning, given a situation where many of the learners are not highly literate. Rather, it would be necessary to establish a context of dialogue. Enough historical material should be presented so that learners have the possibility of making informed judgments : beyond that, ways must be found to enable the issues of history to become the key concern and thus to allow people to decide and judge, by drawing on their own collective experiences and discussion.

An absolute principle, then, is involvement by the learners, themselves. Spoken input should never be longer than 20 minutes without intervening breaks, as beyond that, in any case, it is unlikely that learners would be able to absorb what is being said. Then, some kind of activity, or questions, should be set, which enable learners to work on the raw material which has been provided. This might be a game (see Appendix); a set of

questions (e.g. why was it a problem for the ICU to have small numbers of members scattered over a large number of factories?); a bit of reading which could be done aloud in a sub-group, to be reported back to the group as a whole in order to get a composite whole (e.g. 3 groups : one to read up on taxation, one on the pass laws, one on the compounds, in order to understand how a labour-force was created and controlled; or reading up on different campaigns of the 1950's, and then reporting back in terms of what grievances and what social groups were involved, thus developing an understanding of the national-democratic struggle).

A further principle is variety. Audio-visuals, in various forms, are often a most effective learning technique. These could include maps on over-heads, which are also reproduced in hand-outs; and the use of slide/tape shows or videos. The limits of these techniques, however, is their passivity : learners still "absorb".

It, therefore, becomes necessary to develop activities so that there is a real involvement. Games essentially ask people to transpose themselves into a historical situation, and then to act out responses, based perhaps on a minimum of information to ensure context. This may then be followed up by discussion, analysis and critique. Simple ice-breakers play a role in building group spirit and opening up interest in a topic. One example was for people to stand in two concentric circles, one facing inwards and one outwards, and to introduce themselves to a partner. They were then given 30 seconds to ask a question, and to provide an answer: "Was Jan van Riebeeck a squatter?" A whistle is blown, they move on to the next partner, and begin again. The noise, confusion, and humour of the question make for a complete break with traditional learning situations. More seriously, there is an overt and rapid demystification of a "great

man" in history, who may now be contextualised and even made fun of. His history is not necessarily ours.

Another important point, is relevance. How to show that history lives? One method was the use of contemporary freedom songs, which could then be related back to the topics at hand, e.g. "Ons swart mense/seuns van slawe/ wil ons eie land terug/wat gesteel is van ons ouers/toe hul in die donker is ... ens." Another might be to take a pamphlet, or events such as June 16 activities, and to draw out from them issues which can then be traced back - such as mass involvement, or the specific role of workers or students.

Extremely useful, in this regard, was to draw directly on the learner's own experience. Thus, workers could explain certain aspects of factory life. Africans and Coloureds could compare controls over their lives. People could be asked to describe the lives of their grandparents and, through this, to realise how recently access to land was still a common feature of many South Africans' lives. These methods expose differences in the situations of different social groups. They also expose the gaps in knowledge which exist between sectors of the oppressed, and thus a more sympathetic approach to difficulties of building unity and coherence in the past.

This kind of approach not only makes history more relevant, by directly relating it to concerns within the learner's own range of experience, but also builds the self-confidence of the learner. They - despite their lack of formal education - do have the resources available to deal with complex, theoretical issues. This is important, even for the simple reason of giving the learner the heart to continue with the course, and enabling

them, thus, to begin to gain an overall and cumulative understanding from session to session.

Indeed, this approach was integrated right from the start of the course : each learner was asked to choose a newspaper article which showed any aspect of apartheid and how it affected people's lives. Then, in groups of 3, they had to choose one article for presentation to the broader group, to be presented by someone other than the person who had found the article (encouraging them to listen, to focus carefully, and to begin to develop criteria as to the relative importance of issues). As the article was presented, I asked questions - to get expansion on particular points, or for explanations not contained in the article itself. Who was affected? How? Why? Are there other groups affected/not affected in the same way? Comparisons were made with other articles - for example, did an article on unemployment relate to someone else's article on squatter removals? Did this help explain problems of education which someone else had picked upon? Why were squatters moved? And so on - with the various issues and aspects of apartheid being written up on newssheet. Before long, and with very little manipulation from the co-ordinator, a composite picture of apartheid had been built up, in both its economic and racial aspects.

With some pride, the group of learners realised they had written a contemporary history, using easily available sources. History had begun to come alive - and this particular session was then followed up with a video, looking at a history of resistance to white rule, thus immediately placing the learner's analysis in a larger historical context. The session ended with a freedom song, and the unfurling of a banner produced by UCT students, which focused on the clauses of the Freedom Charter and the underlying problems it addressed. Different media thus reinforced each

other, and learning became an activity, rather than an alienating intellectual effort!

THEMES AND ISSUES

It is clear, then, that in dealing with the past, the end goal is not history, but rather the contemporary. While there might be exposure to disagreements over interpretation (indeed, comparisons of documents or statements expressing different viewpoints opens up much room for discussion), the aim is not to turn the learners into historians. Rather - and I do not think one need to be ashamed of this - history is serving a more partisan goal. The end-point, in fact, is politics. Thus, the course co-ordinator needs a particular sensitivity to the political questions which learners are facing in their own specific organisations or spheres of work. The method of teaching enhances this, because space is given for learners to define their own problems and concerns.

Furthermore, there is thus a crucial sense in which the course co-ordinator is also a learner, open to the dynamics and situations of the oppressed majority's lives, and in this way deepening his/her own understanding of where historical forces have brought us to, and the particular levels of consciousness through which people interpret their own lives.

The central themes, or threads, which run through the entire course, then, are defined by contemporary demands in a very immediate way. One example may draw out this point - in the run of things, the wars of dispossession against Bantu-speakers are probably more central to South African history than the period of Khoi-Khoi resistance. Yet, our session on land dispossession drew largely on the latter, summarising the former in a few

sentences and in hand-outs to be read after the session. What gave impetus to this decision was a very specific need to show that the Western Cape, itself, has a tradition of resistance, and thus to enable people in this region to insert themselves into a national dynamic, rather than simply seeing their history as a bastard appendage. It might lead to a slightly distorted historical sense - but it builds a greater confidence in one's own abilities to participate in shaping the history yet to come.

What, then, were the primary themes which the course intended to bring out? In the first place, history was presented as a people's history. "Great" figures - Jan van Riebeeck, Cecil John Rhodes - were often debunked and their role purposely underplayed. It is the role of ordinary people in the making of the past that makes it possible to rediscover history as a popular history.

Within this, their history has been a history of oppression. Learners experience their own lives as a situation of oppression : they are entitled to expect that history will reflect the changing relationship between oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited. What the learner demands are the tools to understand this. Thus, the course must bring out the manner of identifying social groups and the particular interests around which they cohere. This is not a monolithic view : within both rulers and ruled there are divisions, and these change over time. A crucial component of building unity in the present is precisely to acknowledge the differences amongst different social sectors.

History is about the particular contours and nature of the relationship between conflicting social groups. In South Africa, this takes the form of the dialectic between class and race oppression. History is a powerful

means for understanding this in the present. How much more concrete, for example, to look at how the development of passes, compounds, and land alienation contributed to the power of mine-bosses, than to engage in an abstract sociological debate about the appropriate schema?

The last major theme is, obviously, that of resistance : not a uni-linear resistance, albeit a continuous and heroic history of struggle. Rather, through an appropriate understanding of the social context and forces at play, it is necessary to show the arduous task of building unity. It has been in periods where the masses have concretely engaged in struggle in an organised way, that the greatest advances have been made. This is a version of history which makes absolute sense to learners in the present situation. Their questions relate rather to how this unity in struggle has been built, to what tactics and strategies were developed, and to what were the successes and failures. Thus, the past and theory are integrated into the present and the concrete tasks of changing the reality which has removed from the oppressed their role as historical actors, as subjects rather than objects of history.

PROBLEMS

The above sections have drawn out some lessons and experiences of teaching a popular history. It would be ridiculous to claim that in practice, and for all participants the ideal goals were achieved. The shrinking in numbers of people on the course points to one immediate problem. Beyond that, it was difficult to maintain a consistency of people through all sessions. Problems cropped up at home, organisational duties called, or learners got bored. For some, particularly from African townships, language was a problem. Participation by all on the course was uneven.

Group pressure, assessment within the programme, and a constant stress on discipline, were only partially ways of overcoming these difficulties.

The course laid great stress on the responsibility of having knowledge, the need to pass on to others what had been acquired. In some cases, the growing self-confidence of learners was apparent, and it was surprising how quickly organisations reported a greater involvement and enthusiasm. Others spoke of arguments at work, for example, where their learning experiences rapidly found practical application in their interaction with a wider circle. Yet, in most cases, there was no inbuilt means of assessing the benefits gained from the course (outside of actual contribution within sessions). In short, it would be useful to develop more adequate follow-up mechanisms.

In the medium-term, too, there was no real attempt to deepen and extend the insights which learners might have gained. Materials were distributed, reference was made to books, articles, popular publications - but learners would have to find their own way into a deeper and ongoing interest in the historical issues which had been raised during the course.

Popularising history is not simply a matter of simplifying issues, or of writing in a more straight-forward language. A knowledge of available resources and previous experiences may assist. Yet, there are few places where these positive aspects are accumulated, assessed, sifted and developed. I was able to draw on the insights of an organisation such as ERIC (Education Resource and Information Centre). Yet, at the time of presenting the initial course, I did not make sufficient attempt to store materials and programmes, nor to make detailed notes on responses of course participants and the nature of discussions. The academic who wishes to

popularise his or her craft cannot evade this responsibility. One is not just building the immediate understanding of learners, but making a more general contribution to the development of a capacity for a relevant and dynamic people's education. This must include an explicit contribution to building appropriate mediums and agencies which can store the lessons gained. Otherwise, one is reproducing a situation which the course content and method contradict, in which the academic/co-ordinator maintains unnecessary power through his or her own, individualistic hold on the courses presented.

CONCLUSION

History is a powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressed. As historians, we have much to learn by extending the sphere of our traditional involvement. By popularising history, by playing a creative role in the development of a tradition which makes history accessible to the masses who are not removed from their own past, we vitally enrich the discipline within which we operate. By contributing to a situation where, on the widest possible level, people have understood themselves better, we play a part in allowing history to be consciously made. Thus, we enrich not just a discipline, but our own future.