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No 331

THE STUDY OF SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY: A PROPOSED AGENDA FOR COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL INQUIRY

INTRODUCTION[1]

The goal of this paper is to outline an agenda for comparative historical inquiry, examine the comparative literature on South Africa in light of that agenda and explore the implications such an analytical program might have for our understanding of South African history. The last part of the paper attempts to suggest new directions (stimulate new questions and point at possible new answers) in South African studies. The comparative field is of particular importance in the context of this paper since it allows us to focus more clearly on the theoretical issues involved in the study of history, and evaluate the relations between the general and the particular in concrete historical investigations. The relevance of some of the issues discussed in a comaprative context may go beyond the specific field of comparative history, however.

A COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL APPROACH

In a discussion of various approaches to comparative historical study, Skocpol (1984) identifies two major research strategies, the first of which attempts "to discover causal regularities that account for specifically defined historical processes or outcomes, and explore alternative hypotheses to achieve that end", while the second uses "concepts to develop what might best be called meaningful historical interpretations" (362). Tilly (1984) makes a similar distinction between the universalizing approach, oriented towards the formulation of general social-scientific laws, and the individualizing approach, focused on historical specificity. The basic methodological issue for comparative historical sociology, then, is the choice of an appropriate research strategy. That choice depends not only on the goals of the specific project in question but also, perhaps primarily, on the way we conceptualize the relation of theoretical elaboration to historical inquiries.

A common way of looking at the relations between empirical evidence and abstract conceptualization regards the two as inseparable, one rather useless without the other. Theoretical models are seen as metaphors of historical processes which point to the significant parts of these processes as well as to the ways in which they are interrelated and the ways in which they change over time. They are indispensable to any historical analysis: "In one sense, history remains irreducible; it remains all that happened. In another sense, history does not become history until there is a model: at the moment at which the most elementary notion of causation, process, or cultural patterning,

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[1]I would like to thank Carolyn Hamilton and Leslie Witz for their helpful comments which contributed to the final shape of this paper.

intrudes, then some model is assumed. It may well be better that this should be made explicit. But the moment at which a model is made explicit it begins to petrify into axioms...at the best...we must expect a delicate equilibrium between the synthesizing and the empiric modes, a quarrel between the model and actuality. This is the creative quarrel at the heart of cognition" (Thompson, 1978: 287-8).

Thompson represents a well-balanced perspective dealing with the dual goal of historical sociology - deepening our understanding of concrete case-studies and advancing theoretical knowledge. His position, however, does not go far enough in acknowledging the philosophical blindspot of historical investigation, "blindness to the fact that its truth claims are established ultimately only within a definite practice which is not without its own conditions" (Cousins, 1987: 130). This alerts us to the problematic nature of using history to "test" theoretical hypotheses. The choices of objects of inquiry, appropriate witnesses and rules of evidence (how to distinguish reality from representation; what can be considered as a "cause"; what does and does not count as "proof") are of necessity always made in the context of existing, but not necessarily consciously articulated, "régimes of truth". The validity of theoretical conclusions should thus be qualified in light of the fact that they are produced within a certain historical constellation of power/knowledge relations. Objective truth is an unachievable goal, but one could strive for "detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates *at the present time*" (Foucault, 1980: 133, italics added). What this means is that whereas truth is always implicated in power relations, the latter are not fixed. In other words, historical analysis can expose the conditions of possibility, and thus the limitations, of any given statement, but it cannot provide a foundation for knowledge free of the operation of power.

A possible solution to the dilemma facing any attempt to reconcile the tension between history and theory is to pursue what Foucault, following Nietzsche, refers to as genealogy, a practice which rejects any essentialist view of history in which supra-historical forces act to link the past to the present and point the way to the future in a teleological manner. Genealogical strategies focus, rather, on history as an arena for the operation of multiple, dispersed and conflicting forces which produce historical effects through the accumulation of diverse and undirected events. While renouncing the search for universal truths and refusing "the certainty of absolutes" (Foucault, 1977: 153), genealogical studies can contribute to theoretical elaboration by establishing the concrete ways in which various elements interact under given circumstances, and directing attention to historical configurations which might have general, though tentative and provisional, theoretical implications beyond the specific conditions of their emergence. In that way we can attempt to bypass, without actually overcoming, "the inherent disciplinary resistance of history to self-conscious theorizing" (Hunt, 1990: 96).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The cautious approach to the theorization of history outlined above is informed by a reluctance to embed particular and local stories in grand narratives which seek to reveal the dynamics of history, be it defined as the unfolding of the world-spirit, the laws of motion of capitalist development or the logic of system differentiation. The rejection of any analysis which operates in terms of the performance of meta-historical forces, however, does not necessarily mean that it should be impossible to identify and accord analytical importance to certain forces which recurrently operate in specific historical circumstances. In fact, it is precisely by focusing on such forces in their particular and localized manifestations that one can best contribute to general theoretical elaboration, and at the same time not lose sight of the historical specificity of the objects of investigation.

There are numerous analytical factors whose effects can be detected in diverse circumstances. Ethnicity, race, nation, gender, class, state, ecology, as well as many other factors, are all organizing principles of human social activity. At the abstract theoretical level one cannot assume the primacy of any of the above. Each may acquire analytical importance depending on the phenomenon to be explained and the historically specific conditions under which it operates. The selection of some of these factors in any concrete inquiry is of necessity arbitrary, at least to some extent, if only for reasons of time and space which limit the reach of any particular study. Given the present conditions in the field of South African studies, and the gaps which exist in the literature in terms of topics and periods covered, it has been convenient to focus in comparative work on those issues to which substantial scholarly attention has already been directed - the formation of class structures, state institutions and, to a much lesser extent, collective identities. This is not to say that these are the only factors of importance. Gender, for example, is a major factor whose serious study in the South African context has only recently taken off. A conceivable way of overcoming this limitation would be to integrate gender into the analysis (following Scott, 1988) as a constitutive factor of other social relations, rather than treat it as a separate domain of sexuality and the family. What this means is exploring, even if only in a speculative manner, its integral effects on issues such as the rise of the migrant labor system (Bozzoli, 1983) or the construction of ethnic identities (Marks, 1989). Advances in historical research in these areas would allow us to incorporate more dimensions into comparative projects.

Class, identity and state formation respectively correspond, though are not identical, to the classical distinction between the economic, ideological and political spheres which dates back to the founders of historical sociology, Marx and Weber. From the perspective adopted here, however, class is not to be equated with economy, identity with ideology and state with politics. Each of the above factors is itself shaped by economic, ideological and political forces. One could choose class relations as the substantive area of investigation and analyze

it from a variety of theoretical approaches, emphasizing identity, state and gender. Likewise, one could focus on the study of collective identities within class-analytic or functionalist explanatory frameworks, completely ignoring ideological factors. The choice of objects for historical inquiry and the theoretical perspective used in analyzing them are distinct issues which should not be confused.

The relations between economy, ideology and politics have been a constant theme in the growth of social theory. Various ways of dealing with the issue have developed over the years, particularly with regard to the links between material and extra-material factors. An interesting way of coming to terms with the manifold potential representations of material reality is contained in the (material) territory and (discursive) map metaphor which defines the two as interdependent factors whose relation is not fixed and does not adhere to any consistent principle of correspondence: "Territory is not a *tabula rasa* of sense impressions awaiting the imprint of false consciousness; map does not model or reflect 'external reality'. Indeed, there are many ideological phenomena which cannot be located at either level, but are produced solely through particular forms of interaction between them. Their paradigm, perhaps appropriately, is the mirage. Neither a pure hallucination, nor a pure environmental effect, the mirage is produced at the intersection between certain climatic conditions in the desert and a certain movement of desire on the part of thirsty travellers" (Cohen, 1988: 56). The metaphor is far from being transparent; its advantage over other base-superstructure models, though, consists in conveying the ambiguity of the relation without leaving them entirely to the mercy of random theoretical contingencies.

Such an approach suggests that no permanent hierarchical relations between theoretical factors can or should be established. In that sense it joins the call for the development of a particular, local, regional knowledge which is "an autonomous, non-centralised kind of theoretical production, one that is to say whose validity is not dependent on the approval of the established régimes of thought" (Foucault, 1980: 81). Configurations of class, identity and state are historically specific; they are not fixed and rigid, but neither are they completely random as Laclau puts it: "Just to say that everything is contingent, then, is an assertion that would only make sense for an inhabitant of Mars...[social agents] are therefore never in the position of the absolute chooser who, faced with the contingency of all possible courses of action, would have no reason to choose. On the contrary, what we always find is a limited and given situation in which objectivity is partially constituted and also partially threatened; and in which the boundaries between the contingent and the necessary are constantly displaced" (Laclau, 1990: 27). Theoretical constructions do not have a law-like validity; at the same time, they can provide useful guidance for genealogical investigations of the material and discursive conditions of possibility for the emergence and elaboration of racial and political orders. In that sense, one can combine broad but diffuse theoretical concerns

with concrete historical inquiries so that they illuminate and enrich each other without subordinating one to the other (Hunt, 1990).

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Comparative historical studies call for a particular attention to the question of sources. The attempt to offer a joint analysis of more than one society, and frequently over a long time-span, raises a critical issue in projects which require by their very nature the assimilation and reinterpretation of numerous, widely disparate historical studies. The kind of synthetic endeavor undertaken in this type of studies is needed to compensate for the excessive specificity (from the point of view of a sociologist) which is characteristic of much historical work: "In the historians' matrix, constituted vertically by time, horizontally by space, and third dimensionally by focus, there are only a few specialists situated at each of the thousands of unique intersections; there they dig long and deep...their work is the basis on which all generalists must depend. And yet the cost of such concentration is often a loss of peripheral vision" (Abu-Lughod, 1989: ix).

A broad historical vision need not come, however, at the expense of the profusion of localized and particular knowledges, but, rather, interact with them, provide tentative conclusions without effecting a theoretical closure and stimulate further investigations with a view to modify itself constantly in the process. More specifically, what this means in the South African context is that the question of historical synthesis should not be posed in mutually exclusive terms of specificity versus generalization but, rather, as a joint operation in which macro-historical analyses are sustained by and in turn give nourishment to micro-based inquiries. The tension between the two approaches cannot and need not be eliminated in the work of any single individual, but the field as a whole would benefit from more consciously synthetic efforts. The alternative is a danger of fragmentation into impoverished generalizations on the one hand, and dull empiricism of little interest to anyone but the specialists, on the other.

SURVEY OF LITERATURE

I consider in this section the major comparative studies of South Africa, those comparing Africa and the United States (Greenberg, 1980; Fredrickson, 1981; Lamar and Thompson, 1981; Cell, 1982) and some of those comparing South Africa and Israel/Palestine (Giliomee and Gagiano, 1990; Ryan and Will, 1990). These studies do not exhaust the existing comparative work, but they are considered to be important works in the field and the critique I direct at them generally applies to most other studies as

well.[2] Three broad problems can be detected in the literature, not all of which are equally prominent in each of the studies discussed in this paper:

(1) A general focus on the study of colonial and settler interests and strategies as the major, if not exclusive, areas of historical concern. Most of the studies use a top-down approach, at times consciously so and at other times by default. In this respect the comparative study of South Africa society shares the common bias of the literature on colonialism which tends to ignore the importance and role of indigenous people and institutions in the unfolding of colonial processes.

(2) Concentration on class and state issues as substantive areas of historical investigation. The historical processes of the formation of collective racial, national and ethnic identities do not appear as an important substantive dimension for comparative inquiry. None of the studies devotes much attention to this issue.

(3) The use of theoretical perspectives employing class and state as the only analytical factors of importance. The power of material and political interests to shape reality is posited as the major explanatory factors at the expense of other factors such as identity. This point is related to the previous one but is distinct from it; even in the study of class and state, theories focusing on identity factors could be employed.

One other point worth mentioning in this context is the meager South African presence in the comparative field. Not only have South African scholars not produced any major work in the field, but they have hardly written any essays on these issues. Even a comparative work edited and published in South Africa (Gilomee and Gagiano, 1990) leaves the discussion of comparative dimensions to people from the other societies studied in the volume - Northern Ireland and Israel - as well as to British and Americans. The effects of this absence, and the prominence of American scholars with their own society-specific concerns, are important issues, a proper discussion of which falls beyond the scope of this paper.

In what follows I briefly address several of the methodological and theoretical features of the comparative work, starting with the relations between history and theory discussed earlier in the paper. After identifying the gaps in the literature, I proceed in subsequent sections to present an agenda aimed at overcoming some of the limitations of the extant work. In the last part of

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[2]One major exception is Seidman (1990), comparing the rise of militant labor movement in South Africa and Brazil. I do not deal with this work here because it does not attempt to analyze these societies "as a whole", as the other studies do, and its goals are more limited in time and concern - studying labor unionism rather than race relations or overall political conflict.

the paper I illustrate the usefulness of an alternative approach.

History and Theory

Greenberg (1980) is the most theoretically conscious of all the comparative studies of South Africa. In fact, he is the only one to structure his entire study around a theoretical concern, defining his goal as a search for recurring patterns among seemingly random events, using data collected in diverse settings to test hypotheses in much the same vein as Skocpol's search for causal regularities in history. His disciplinary background in the social sciences marks his work from other studies which are less concerned with explicit reflection on theoretical issues, adopting more modest historiographical goals. Thus, Lamar and Thompson (1981) derive some limited conclusions regarding frontier processes but do not attempt hypothesis testing. Their approach is focused on using data from one case study in order to comment on the other, without engaging in a systematic comparison of the two societies. Their book offers a series of paired studies dealing with several issues with no overall discussion (except for their introductory essay, 14-40). Fredrickson (1981) adopts a similar approach, though perhaps with somewhat stronger emphasis on social theory (made more explicit in a subsequent work, 1988: 216-235). He does not eschew the use of general conceptual schemes in comparative historical inquiry; indeed he sees it as essential. At the same time, he keeps primary interest in historical particularity or individuality, asserting that "the principal aim should be better understanding of the individual cases, each of which will presumably look different in the light of the other or others" (1981: xv). Cell (1982) takes a further step towards theoretical elaboration with his discussion of the different interpretations of the emergence of segregation (see chapter on South Africa: 46-71), but without making an attempt to "test" general theoretical models.

The comparative studies of South Africa and Palestine/Israel show similar tendencies. Giliomee and Gagiano (1990) include in their books only a few essays which offer systematic comparisons between South Africa, Israel and Northern Ireland on any issue, with little attempt to engage with broader theoretical issues beyond the specific cases in question. Ryan and Will (1990) do not engage in that either, limiting their work to the analysis of the similarities of the legal structures in the two states.

With the exception of Greenberg (and Cell to a limited extent) most studies do not have an explicit theoretical agenda, then, and the analytical insights derived from them are largely coincidental to the main purpose of the comparisons - a better understanding of the particular societies in question. In that sense, the comparative historical work on South Africa tends to follow the individualizing approach identified by Tilly, though not without following an implicit agenda, some of whose characteristics are examined in the following sections.

Angle of Observation

Greenberg (1980) adopts in his analysis a clear top-down approach, exclusively dealing with the operation of dominant class actors. He is not unaware of the existence of other actors, but he considers them as "in certain periods, perhaps not the principal forces shaping social relations and making for political change and conflict" (x), a euphemistic way of dismissing their importance altogether. He consistently focuses on the power of dominant forces to mold reality according to their class interests by undermining, limiting, organizing, dislodging, subordinating, controlling, immobilizing and repressing indigenous people (all terms taken from p. 26 and repeated throughout the work). Subordinate groups do not seem to contribute much to the shape of the social order and their resistance (meaning here mere *re*-action rather than action) can affect the racial order only "after capitalist development had taken the society beyond the period of [racial] intensification" (399), and even then to a very limited extent.

Capitalist development itself - the major force shaping society according to Greenberg - is apparently not affected by indigenous visions and designs; rather, it determines, as an external force, the ability of indigenous people to bring out latent uncertainty and disunity in the ranks of the dominant class actors. From this perspective, then, indigenous people are no more than victims (passive or otherwise) of the strategies adopted by colonial and settler forces. These latter forces occupy a central place in Fredrickson's work as well which exhibits "a persistent focus on the attitudes, beliefs, and policies of the dominant whites, and the cumulative understanding that such an emphasis provides about the causes, character, and consequences of white supremacy in the two societies" (xx). Neither author argues that indigenous institutions and processes need not be studied, but the issue clearly occupies a low place in their set of priorities.

Cell (1982) goes further than the others to devote a whole chapter to reactions to segregation (230-275). However, being the last chapter in the book it reflects not only the low priority of the issue, but also Cell's consideration of it as a residual factor that needs not be integrated into the main narrative of the rise of segregation. The fact that the "book is about white people" (230), is justified by the claim that "the process was mainly white action and black-brown reaction" (234). Even when Cell concedes that "what was at stake was not only what the dominant group wished to impose but how much the oppressed were willing to accept for the time being" (234) he credits marginalized actors with the capacity to resist but not to initiate and actively intervene in the making of history, much in the same way as Greenberg does.

In the case of the comparative studies between South Africa and Palestine/Israel, Ryan and Will (1990) deny any indigenous role other than that of victims of repressive legal systems. Giliomee and Gagiano (1990) devote an essay to indigenous resistance (Neuberger's comparison of the ANC, PLO and IRA: 54-77) but

primarily focus on issues such as the dominant political system, international intervention and contemporary strategic manoeuvres with little historical analysis or depth.

The approaches surveyed above contrast with the work of Lamar and Thompson (1981) whose focus on processes on the frontier, a zone of interaction and conflict between indigenous and colonial actors, is of necessity more attuned to the need to take indigenous political, ideological and institutional developments seriously. Any other approach would make the notion of the frontier as an environment extended in time and space meaningless. Most probably, the focus of inquiry reflects a prior attitude regarding the importance of indigenous factors in the colonial process. It is not surprising that Thompson, among the very first to have introduced the African "forgotten factor" into the field of southern African studies, should be more insistent on the importance of indigenous factors than most other writers.

Identity as a Substantive Area of Inquiry

Greenberg studies the impact of capitalist development on patterns of racial domination. He does not seem to regard the formation of identities as a worthy topic for study in this respect. Although he acknowledges that collective identities are important phenomena in their own right in that they emerge under specific historical circumstances and are subject to a process of change, he does not deal with that process directly. In fact, he takes for granted the existence of groups identified in racial and ethnic terms. The historical processes which give rise to racial concepts and meanings lie beyond the scope of his work.

Similar attitudes are manifested in the rest of the comparative studies, none of which is primarily devoted to the analysis of identity processes or make a noticeable effort to incorporate the issue systematically into the study of social and political systems. The work of Fredrickson is an exception in some respects as he does discuss the formation of identities in the context of slavery and conquest. However, his focus is clearly on tensions between settlers and colonial authorities and conflicts among the former (Afrikaners and British) on ethnic and linguistic grounds. His top-down approach is reflected in the excessive importance he attaches to developments internal to dominant groups as compared to the meager attention devoted to other forces.

In subsequent sections I attempt to illustrate the importance of the study of identity as a substantive dimension in its own right, as well as a theoretical factor which can be used effectively in the study of class and state. The comparative literature is weak on both counts. The lack of adequate consideration of identity issues results in a failure to come to terms with the ways people conceptualize and construct their own world, without which any social analysis would remain at the level of a false dichotomy between "objective" reality and its multiple "subjective" representations.

Identity as an Analytical Factor

As argued earlier, identity formation as a substantive historical process is distinct from identity as an analytical factor, though the two are related. For Greenberg, concepts of identity - subsumed under the label of primordialism - are devoid of any necessary theoretical, as opposed to empirical, relation to social and economic transformation. Class relations, on the other hand, are analytically and historically inseparable from racial domination. In fact, he goes on to argue, racial domination is essentially a class phenomenon, "a series of specific class relations that vary by place and over time and that change as a consequence of changing material conditions" (406). Race and ethnicity are real forces but they do not generate their own dynamics. They cannot be understood in themselves but only through the study of class formation.

As mentioned earlier, other studies do not directly engage with theoretical issues to the same extent as Greenberg and their approach is more implied than explicit. Cell tends to adopt a similar emphasis on class factors, though he regards them as being inextricably entangled with race. Fredrickson rejects any attempt to determine the primacy of class vs. race since the two constantly interact and modify each other (xx-xxi). However, none of the works treated here translates the aversion to class determinism into a thorough problematization of the concept of identity and its role in social and political developments.[3]

A PROPOSED NEW AGENDA

Three major points which can serve as building blocks for a new agenda for comparative historical inquiry have emerged from the discussion so far: the need to develop a comparative historical approach attempting to reconcile, without resolving, the creative tension between history and theory; the study of identity as a substantive issue, as well as in its effects on class and state; the need to incorporate indigenous structures systematically into the analysis. The three elements are *not* intrinsically related and in fact some recent theoretically innovative studies expressing similar analytical concerns to those presented in the early sections of this paper fail to give any adequate consideration to indigenous forces.[4] To fill in some of the gaps evident in the comparative literature I introduce at this point three concepts, consideration of which would prove crucial to the formulation of a new agenda for the comparative study of South African society: historical models, identity formation and indigenous capacities.

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[3]I make a distinction between "identity" and "ideology". Some of the works deal with racial ideology but rarely with identity as understood here. I elaborate on this issue later in the paper.

[4]I have in mind in particular Ashforth (1990) and Crais (1992) and perhaps Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) as well.

None of these concepts is entirely new. My thinking about them has been influenced by existing scholarship, and in particular the work done by the social history school in South African studies which contains a wealth of historical insights, very valuable in enhancing our understanding of the unfolding of indigenous class and identity processes. Very little of that work, however, is written from a comparative perspective, most of it is descriptive in nature and its contribution to theoretical elaboration has been rather implicit as it does not flow from, nor lead to, a clear theoretical agenda. My goal here, in contrast, is to use insights derived from that work in order to formulate an explicit agenda for comparative historical inquiry with a distinct theoretical focus.

Historical Models

A common approach in studies of South African society analyzes it as an instance of some general historical process or structure such as settler colonialism, racial capitalism or "the Prussian Road". I argue in this section that models of this nature are both ahistorical and analytically inadequate. I deal here in particular with colonial models, but the critique I present is aimed at the general mode of analysis embodied in the use of historical models (further discussion of models of capitalism is offered in a subsequent section). Colonial models allow us to place processes of settlement and resistance in a specific historical context; their usefulness beyond that point is doubtful. Conceptualizations of colonialism regard it as a social formation characterized by a clash of opposites which by definition share no ground between them (Fanon, 1963). I argue in contrast that colonialism is not a type of society with its own distinct laws of motion. The "Manichean Allegory" (JanMohamed, 1986) takes for granted in an uncritical manner the existing colonial categories, rather than regarding them as having been constructed in a historical process of formation of interests, identities and organizations. Colonizers and colonized frequently came to share cultural characteristics such as religion and language; their political institutions varied enormously in the extent to which they accommodated indigenous participation in the exercise of power; their class structures did not necessarily reflect a rigid dichotomy. Colonial categories, then, are not immutable, pitting two irreconcilable groups against each other, but rather "problematic, contested, and changing...the otherness of the colonized person was neither inherent nor stable; his or her difference had to be defined and maintained; social boundaries that were at one point clear would not necessarily remain so" (Cooper and Stoler, 1989: 609-610).

Colonial concepts are neither sufficiently historical *nor* properly analytical. Their ahistorical nature is manifested in the inability to account for variety and frequent changes in the nature, dynamics and internal relations in colonial societies in terms of models. Thus, for example, South Africa and Israel are commonly classified as settler-colonial societies but their historical trajectories have been different in many respects. Analytically, colonial models are deficient in that they do not

present clear positions with regard to the relations among conceptual variables. They do not tell us if and how colonial societies differ from non-colonial societies in the ways in which class, race, state and gender affect each other and interact to produce certain historical outcomes. In other words, they do not establish any *specific social-theoretical* dynamics - as distinct from historical descriptions - which are unique to colonial societies and serve analytically to distinguish them from other types of societies.

As an alternative, I suggest that it would be more fruitful to tackle the multiplicity of colonial structures with a two-track approach: study them in their full historical specificity without imposing artificial boundaries between vaguely defined classes of cases and, at the same time, examine them by using analytical concepts without constructing idiosyncratic explanatory models which have no use beyond one specific example.[5]

Identity Formation

Identity formation is a process whereby people come to define themselves, and be defined, as members of collective groups. The existence of nations, races and ethnic groups must not be taken for granted; not only have they not always existed in their present form, but their appearance at a given time on the historical scene is not an irreversible event. They can grow, stagnate and decline, and the balance among their different internal components may shift over time. Furthermore, the meaning of terms assigned to or chosen by groups is not fixed; the content of identical terms may appear unchanged over long historical periods, even when they actually go through much variation in time and space. The emergent nature of collective identities requires that group interaction and conflict be studied as a process of construction and modification of external and internal boundaries in the course of the unfolding of relations with other groups.

Collective identity should not be conflated with national or ethnic ideology. As used here, identity refers to an ensemble consisting of both material and discursive practices; it cannot be reduced to consciously-held convictions. Consciousness is certainly a major component of identity, but it operates together with other factors such as language, religion, education and social proximity, all of which shape identity, though not necessarily in a conscious way. Even in the realm of ideas, identity stands out as a specific case of ideas people have about themselves, rather than about others or the world at large. An adequate strategy for the study of identity formation could thus tackle its manifold manifestations along the lines suggested by

[5]A case in point is the Colonialism of Special Type model, applicable only to South Africa.

Omi and Winant with regard to racial formation,[6] asking "how the widely disparate circumstances of individual and group racial identities, and of the racial institutions and social practices with which these identities are intertwined, are formed and transformed over time...through political contestation over racial meanings" (Omi and Winant, 1986: 69).

Identity boundaries, especially under colonial and post-colonial conditions, are often bolstered by intellectuals, indigenous and foreign alike, who take it upon themselves to develop a viable basis for group existence. The construction of such "imagined communities" frequently involves the operation of what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) call the invention of tradition - the use of new cultural elements disguised, for purposes of legitimation, as traditional artifacts. A variation on this theme, particularly important in the African context, is the "creation of tribalism" (Vail, 1989) - the construction of identities not as relics from pre-colonial times but as new institutions created during the colonial period. These processes are frequently initiated by outsiders - missionaries, colonial administrators and social scientists - but also in collaboration with local elites.

The obviously manipulative aspects of these constructed identities must not lead, however, to the conclusion that the people in whose name such identities are devised are passive in the process. They play a crucial interventionist role by actively producing their own traditions or "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990) and by setting limits on, rejecting or accepting in a conditional or unqualified manner, externally-induced identities. Thus, the study of identity formation calls for tracing the contribution of the various forces shaping the process, at the elite level (be it external or internal), as well as at the grassroots level (see Hamilton, 1993 for such a study in the context of South African history). In that sense, much of the scholarly discussion about the construction of *the Other*, focusing on the ways people of color are imagined in racial discourses, is unsatisfactory (of the major collections of essays critically dealing with racial discourse, most essays in Gates, 1986 and Goldberg, 1990 follow this line; LaCapra, 1991 goes further towards incorporating counter-hegemonic perspectives in the study of the production of racial meanings in a variety of cultural contexts including South Africa).

The focus in cultural studies on the deconstruction of concepts of otherness in Western discourse, to the exclusion of the possibility of their transcendence in cultural practices, results in ignoring a crucial aspect of the formation of identities -

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[6]Racial formation is an instance of identity formation. Omi and Winant refuse to assimilate race into nation or ethnicity and the distinctions they make in this regard are useful. However, the focus on the emergent nature of identities and their construction in a political contestation over meanings brings to light the similar formative dynamics involved in the various instances of identity.

their implication in political and cultural processes to which the marginalized make critical contributions.[7] The preoccupation in the literature with the overwhelming capacity of hegemonic powers to define, and thus marginalize, *the Other* implicitly re-enacts the very operation of silencing which is at the heart of hegemonic discourse. As hooks expresses it in her critique of that approach, "often this speech about the 'Other' is also a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences, that space where our words would be if we were speaking, if there were silence, if we were there. This 'we' is that 'us' in the margins, that 'we' who inhabit marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance. Enter that space. Often this speech about the 'other' annihilates, erases: 'No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself'" (hooks, 1990: 151-2). The calls for the transformation of marginality into a site of resistance, for the formation of radical black subjectivity (hooks, 1990: 15-22; 145-153) for a cultural politics of difference (West, 1990) and for studying the reverse effects of the *othering* of blacks on the construction of whiteness (Morrison, 1992) move us beyond concerns with hegemonic racial discourses into the realm of affirmative counter-hegemonic conceptions of identity (hooks and West, 1991). This move is linked to the need to deal with another major absence in the comparative literature - the role of indigenous capacities.

Indigenous Capacities

Comparative studies of colonial-type conflicts in general, and of South African society in particular, are usually presented from the perspectives of dominant groups. This does not mean that scholars necessarily identify with the goals and visions of the groups which emerged as victorious in the course of history, but rather that they consider colonial forces as the most significant actors in the making of history. In consequence, such studies largely ignore the organization and activities of non-dominant actors as factors in their own right - not just as passive receivers of or resisters to colonial designs - which are no less critical to the analysis (see Guha, 1989 for a critique of historiography in the Indian context). This disregard for what might be called, following Foucault (1980: 78-92), *subjugated knowledges* is a problem which prevents such work from going beyond the interests, strategies, concerns and designs of colonial and settler forces. It thus replicates in the analytical sphere the marginalization of indigenous people in practice, relegating the latter to the status of "people without history" (Wolf, 1984; Stern, 1988 offers a powerful critique of world-system perspectives along these lines).

To counterbalance the colonial bias, I employ here the concept of indigenous capacities to focus on the attributes of indigenous structures which shape the capacity of people to organize at the

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[7] My criticism is not directed at the choices made by any single author studying colonial discourse, but rather at the limited, and limiting, constitution of the field as a whole.

economic, political and identity levels, and use their modes of organization to sustain and open up avenues of independent being and growth outside the control of colonial and settler forces. A comparative historical inquiry addressing this issue can contribute to our understanding of the ways in which the unfolding of colonial processes were shaped by indigenous factors, and re-evaluate the role of colonial factors which have been at the center of scholarly attention so far. It is important, though, not to conflate history *from the bottom up* with history *of the bottom*, as Kaye (1984: 228) puts it.[8] Indigenous capacities are usually part of the picture, but they exert their impact in conjunction with other factors. The task of comparative studies is to incorporate fully indigenous capacities into the analytical framework, evaluate their relative levels in various contexts and investigate their differential inputs into the historical process.[9]

The analytical point of most importance here is the emphasis on the role of indigenous structures as integral components of the history of colonial and post-colonial formations. By making this point, however, I am advancing no claims to be speaking for indigenous people (or any other group for that matter); nor am I arguing that indigenous sources are necessarily more reliable and valuable to historical analysis or that indigenous scholars present more "correct" or "relevant" positions regarding the past. Colonial sources can actually be read against the grain to serve counter-hegemonic purposes; on the other hand, indigenous scholars frequently operate in terms of implicit colonial assumptions even as they adopt resolute anti-colonial positions. The political ramifications of alternative versions of history are rarely transparent as they might seem at first sight. The critique offered here, though not without its own political implications, makes no attempt to go beyond the realm of academic debates; it thus avoids grandiose proclamations about the transition to post-colonial historiography and the emancipatory production of history in the work of any particular individual or academic institution.

ILLUSTRATIONS

I turn now to consider some applications of the agenda outlined above. I attempt to demonstrate its usefulness through the discussion of three issues: (1) the impact of its historical

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[8]Thus, Eurocentrism should not be replaced by Afrocentrism, or any other form of "centrism", except perhaps in the context of a temporary and explicitly corrective operation, clearly limited in its objectives. The crucial and much more difficult, perhaps impossible, task is to thoroughly decenter history, without undermining it altogether in the process.

[9]In a non-colonial context, one could use "subaltern", "subordinate", "marginalized", "non-dominant" as a substitute for "indigenous". The latter term, however, does not convey any sense of a necessary social hierarchy, whereas the former do.

approach and the focus on identity on the analysis of class; (2) the importance of identity formation and indigenous capacities in the comparative study of historical trajectories in South Africa and Palestine/Israel; (3) the role of indigenous factors in the comparative study of racial formation in the South Africa and the United States. For reasons of time and space these issues can be dealt with only very briefly here,[10] hopefully serving to illustrate some potential usages of the proposed agenda and stimulate further explorations along the lines suggested here. The goal of this exercise is to give substance to a research strategy aimed at gaining theoretically-informed insights into concrete historical phenomena and, at the same time, arriving at empirically-grounded observations which might shed light on theoretical formulations.

Class and Identity

I discuss in this section two class-based explanations of the rise of racial segregation in modern South Africa - the cheap labor and the split labor market theses. I consider here three texts, none of which is explicitly comparative, though all draw on theoretical models of supposed universal validity (Davies, 1979; Bonacich, 1981; Burawoy, 1981).[11] I chose to discuss them in this context because they serve to illustrate the relevance of the comparative agenda to the study of issues of general concern in South African history. When seen in light of the preceding agenda, two major problems seem to plague class approaches: (1) they regard class interests as objective and pre-given by the mode of production, rather than as historically constructed through discourses of identity, and thus fail to capture important aspects of class formation processes; (2) they tend to embed localized accounts of class conflict, limited in time and space, in grand narratives of the logic of capitalist development and thus lose sight of much of the specificity of the construction of race in South Africa.

The cheap labor thesis focuses on the imperatives of capitalist accumulation dictating that masses of unskilled black, rather than white, workers be employed in the mines. The reason for was the divergent black and white proletarianization processes. Africans faced coercive campaigns by the mining industry to drive them into wage labor, while whites moved to cities as an unintended result of other processes without being subjected "to any of the particular exploitative institutions associated with the migrant labour system, and they had no base in any 'reserve' economy" (Davies, 1979: 58). Whites became "relatively expensive" compared to the "ultra cheap" Africans. Under these

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[10] I discuss all of these more fully in other places (Greenstein, 1992; 1993 and forthcoming).

[11] It might be objected that the works I chose to illustrate my points are outdated. I believe that at the theoretical, rather than empirical, level the scholarship on South Africa has not moved far beyond the positions presented here.

circumstances, whites were restricted to supervisory and mental positions, filling the role of necessary allies of the power bloc "in the absence of any potential supportive classes among the black population" (ibid: 79).

This analysis, shared in its basic assumptions by most other class accounts, is based on a circular logic. It asserts that the "power bloc" incorporated unskilled white workers because they were available, while black supportive classes did not exist; however, the presence of the former and absence of the latter were a *result* of policies devised by this same power bloc. Classes, supportive or otherwise, as opposed to aggregations of individuals with similar relations to the means of production, have no existence prior to their construction as such in the course of political contests. The focus on the need of the mining industry to fill pre-given places in the division of labor with the appropriate agents prevents us from realizing that the very conceptualization of the productive process as requiring a division into unskilled, artisan and supervisory positions (ibid: 52-53) is not an objective necessity. It was shaped by perceptions of availability and coercibility of labor, interpreted in terms of racial discourses defining some people as potential servants and others as potential masters and allies. Supervision and coordination may play an important role in the process of production, but urban "de-tribalized natives" could have also occupied such positions, supervising other Africans. Blacks and whites have always been internally heterogeneous categories, and there was no inherent economic logic compelling state and capital to treat them as undifferentiated class forces. The operation of discourses of identity, dismissed by Burawoy as "the ideologies and counterideologies of racism" masking real social relations (1981: 280) was crucial in this respect.

Split labor market theory suffers from the same flawed logic as that of the cheap labor thesis. It emphasizes the interests of white workers, rather than capitalists, as determining factors in racial policies. Bonacich (1981) argues that racial segregation emerged under conditions of a labor market split between high-priced white labor and cheap African labor. The former attempted to prevent capital from employing the latter and hence "the impetus for restriction on full African participation in the capitalist sector...was not, as Wolpe and Burawoy contend, an effort by capital to keep African labor cheap, but an effort by white labor to keep capital from displacing them with African cheap labor. Capital wanted to do away with the color bar; white labor fought to maintain it" (ibid: 255). Like the cheap labor thesis, her theory makes an unstated assumption that African workers had to be treated by capital, the state, white workers and, presumably, themselves as a homogeneous group. Africans, however, came from widely varying backgrounds, not only geographically and ethnically but socially and economically as well. Not all were "cheap" in the same way and they maintained different relations to the means of production and to the Native Reserves. Capitalist interests might have been served just as well, if not better, had the mass of African and white workers been disaggregated on the basis of skill and ties to the

countryside, rather than be divided into distinct racial groups, to be uniformly exploited, co-opted or excluded as the case might be.

Both class approaches implicitly treat classes and class segments as necessarily white or black in their entirety. They analyze labor market dynamics without giving an account for the prior structuring of class interests on racial grounds. Initial market conditions, however, were themselves shaped by the presumed existence of racial groups, already differentiated into exploitable and co-optable groups, and they can thus not be taken for granted. Any analysis which does not go beyond material interests to explore identity formation cannot fully explain why unorganized whites came to be considered by the white labor movement as potential allies who should be incorporated and organized, whereas black workers facing similar conditions were to be excluded or segregated. To focus on the hypothesized class interests of capitalists, "cheap" and "expensive" workers, ignoring the role racial identities play in the process of class formation, is to fall victim to reification which regards socially constructed categories as "real", having an objective existence outside their production in discourse[12] (see Omi and Winant, 1986: 30-37 for a similar critique).

The racial logic underlying class formation was evident in the differential treatment accorded to white and black workers. White discontent was seen as a serious problem requiring remedial action as one capitalist argued in 1902: "If they [the white unemployed] become a starving and disorderly rabble it will cost us money, exertions, repute and stability ten times what it may cost to tide them through the period until they can be absorbed into the working community" (J.F. FitzPatrick, in Van Onselen, 1982, V. 2: 132). The same logic could have applied to Africans as well, but was not. Potential white troublemakers, in contrast to their black counterparts, enjoyed prior political incorporation, access to arms and military training and a strong sense of possessing inalienable rights, to be guaranteed by the state, to earn "decent" livelihood. The racial sentiments common to white workers and capitalists alike made them more likely partners at the expense of Africans. These attitudes can be attributed to the prior operation of colonial and racial mentalities, already excluding certain options as not worthy of consideration. Whites of all classes formulated their interests in terms of discourses defining "the Natives" as backward people, who might be useful in servicing white needs but cannot and should not be independent and pose a threat to "white civilization". Even mining magnates opposed to the color bar expressed apprehensions about dependence on blacks, regarding the

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[12]Burawoy's (1981: 293) criticism of Bonacich for reifying racism can thus be directed against his own approach. Class is no more real than race. All one can see "in reality" are people occupying various jobs or people of various shades of color. Classifying them into discrete classes and races is a discursive operation with no correspondence in the material world.

removal of restrictions as "an absurdity because, for the proper working of the mining industry a large number of skilled White men of all kinds are essential...[due to the 'actual inferiority' of Natives in doing] any work requiring initiative, fortitude and intelligence" (Lionel Philips in a 1922, in Marks and Rathbone, 1982: 36).

An influx of a large number of indigenous people on a permanent basis into the cities posed a threat to white social and political stability. An organized and tightly regulated system of labor control, including segregation of rural migrants whose permanent residence would be elsewhere, was seen by state agents as a way of lowering the perceived risks, fuelled by racist fantasies, of having the unruly and materially deprived masses roam the streets. In the 1920s influx into the cities started becoming a major issue for state officials (Ashforth, 1990: 82-90). Even before that, however, whites were alarmed by prospects of native urbanization, and called for a policy to "prevent our simply turning him [the African] loose in the country and allowing him to find his own level, for whatever veneer of civilization he may have acquired will rapidly under these circumstances disappear, and unless he is controlled, he will rapidly relapse into barbarism, in which condition he will be a source of endless trouble and difficulty to his white neighbours" (J.H. Pim in 1904, in Dubow, 1989: 24).

From this perspective, then, the insistence of state, capital and white workers on the temporary nature of black presence, provided by the system of migrancy, served primarily to bolster white racial identity. Containing the "dangerous classes", the black unemployed, the criminals, separating them from the white laboring classes and maintaining Law and Order were goals shared by whites of all classes, though important differences did exist among them. The formulation of racial policies was done in terms of discourses constructing "the Natives" as potential subversives, objects for state regulation, rather than as potentially assimilable and co-optable elements like the urbanizing white workers. The need to keep dangerous forces under control became an important concern for city and state authorities alike, especially following the Boer war (see Van Onselen, 1982 for studies of issues of vice and morality in early Johannesburg). At the same time, there were other white voices who made distinctions among indigenous people, attempting to co-opt some elements and exclude others (as evident in the 1919 Godely Report and the Fagan Report), but they usually remained in the minority.[13]

The preceding discussion did not present a full-fledged alternative class theory. Its goal was more modest, to caution against the class-analytic injunction to embed a theory of racism

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[13]Perhaps the most consistent theme in white politics in the last two centuries has been the debate between those advocating qualified incorporation of blacks and those rejecting such option as inevitably destructive of all forms of white power.

in a prior theory of capitalism (Burawoy, 1981: 280). What emerges from the reflections above is precisely the limitation of theories of capitalism in coming to terms with South African history. In positing the universal logic of class interests (be they capitalist as in Davies and Burawoy or white workers as in Bonacich) to which other forces are subordinate, such theories fail to capture the emergent nature of interests and the localized nature of race and class interactions. A new research agenda would proceed from these observations to explore the construction of class interests through discourses of identity (as well as other forces) in a variety of settings without postulating any ahistorical models of capitalism or any necessary hierarchical relations among analytical factors.

Identity Indigenous Capacities in South Africa and Palestine/Israel

This section discusses identity formation in South Africa and in Palestine/Israel, focusing on the role of indigenous capacities in the process. It is part of an overall comparative project analyzing the different historical trajectories of the two societies. It aims to account for the emergence of a single internally differentiated and highly inegalitarian society in South Africa, compared to the emergence of two distinct Palestinian-Arab and Israeli-Jewish societies in Palestine/Israel. My argument is three-fold: (1) the issue should be studied in a historically specific manner, rather than by using models postulating an irreconcilable clash between colonizers and colonized; (2) the study of identity formation is crucial to the analysis; (3) the focus on indigenous capacities is useful for accounting for divergent trajectories. All three concerns are ignored in the existing literature which fails to come to terms with significant aspects of the histories in question by its use of ahistorical colonial models, focus on class and state processes and emphasis on settler and colonial forces.

Both societies have been shaped in a historical process involving protracted struggles between indigenous people and settlers and their descendants. In the realm of identity formation, however, pre-1948 Palestine/Israel saw the creation of clearly defined external boundaries between groups, and the dissolution of internal boundaries within them. The outcome was a consolidation of two coherent and mutually exclusive identities. South Africa, on the other hand, went through a process involving the simultaneous creation and dissolution of relatively permeable boundaries between groups. The result was the emergence of multiple and partially overlapping identities, with no clear correspondence between color, language, religion and legal status. In neither of the cases did an overall national identity develop by 1948, but more room for it was created in South Africa than in Palestine/Israel.

To account for these divergent tendencies, we can begin with the world-historical context within which the processes of formation of identities unfolded. The Jewish settlement of Palestine took

place in a period in which nationalist ideologies and movements had already emerged as important forces in European history. Central and eastern Europe in particular, the regions with the largest Jewish concentrations, became arenas for struggles over national sovereignty, cultural autonomy and self-determination. The same dynamics had tremendous impact on the organization of the Ottoman Empire, including its Middle Eastern territories. Actors in Palestine/Israel, then, operated in a world increasingly dominated by nationalism. Furthermore, for many centuries before the rise of nationalism, Jews, Muslims and Christians had been conscious of their adherence to mutually exclusive world religions. The process of identity formation consequently unfolded in an environment based on exclusivity, religious as well as national in nature.

The rise of nationalism in the Palestinian context was expressed in the ability of Muslims and Christians to construct a more inclusive Palestinian-Arab identity based on a shared language and territory. The trans-national and trans-ethnic character of Christianity and Islam, in contrast to the specific ethnic content of Judaism, made this process move forward with the exclusion of Jews, even the Arabic-speaking among them. The rise of the Zionist movement which targeted the territory as the basis for a Jewish national home created a clash over the national character of the country. Two competing movements thus emerged, both regarding Palestine as their patrimony in mutually exclusive terms. Historical legacy, culture, religion and language combined to create two communities with no overlapping identities and little common ground between them.

In South Africa colonization took place in a different historical context; nationalism had not appeared yet on the scene in Europe, or in other parts of the world. The ideas that societies should be based on ethnic homogeneity, that all speakers of a language should be part of the same polity and that rulers should speak the same language as their subjects were rare at the time. Most Europeans lived in multi-ethnic and multi-lingual societies well into the 19th century. In southern Africa the small scale of most political units made internal linguistic unity more likely than in Europe, but there was no correspondence between linguistic and political boundaries. Religious identities were highly localized in nature without any affiliation to external structures which could have helped sustain indigenous institutions against the religious and cultural onslaught unleashed by colonial forces, missionaries and other "civilizing" agents.

Indigenous southern Africans did not regard racial distinctions as crucial to the way they perceived European settlers and slaves of African and Asian origins. In fact, their own previous history had frequently been one of mixing of people of different "racial" background, such as the Khoisan and the black African populations. This is not to say, of course, that there were no identity boundaries at all in pre-colonial southern Africa, but rather to point to their relative permeability when compared those prevalent in the Middle East. Settlers and indigenous people in southern Africa interacted in a historical environment

which created some space for a variety of ethno-religious combinations and crossing over between groups. This was the background to the cultural and biological interpenetration between settlers, Khoisan and slaves in the colonial period. The lack of prior consolidation of coherent indigenous identities of the Khoisan enabled a process through which they acculturated themselves out of existence, as Marks puts it, and came to share with settlers important attributes in a new syncretic culture. The result was a gradual fusion of foreign and indigenous elements, leading by mid-19th century to a emergence of a large number of Dutch (Afrikaans)-speaking Christians (and Muslims) who became collectively known as Coloreds. Their presence served to mitigate the dichotomous black-white division which might have developed otherwise along Palestinian/Israeli lines.

The Bantu-speaking people of the eastern coast and the interior went through different processes. Their ethnicity was more strongly bounded and their cultural identity more resilient than that of the Khoisan. They initially showed few signs of losing their distinct cultural heritage; nor did they become ideologically incorporated into any comprehensive South African identity (with the exception of the mission-educated Christian minorities in the eastern Cape and Natal). Like the Khoisan, however, they did not develop a sense of belonging to the same "race" or "nation" among themselves. Their myths of origin and political history continued to refer to specific groups (such as Xhosa, Thembu, Mpondo, Zulu), rather than to inclusive indigenous categories. They did not develop a sense of common destiny capable of uniting them through the dissolution of internal boundaries as Muslim and Christian Arabs did in Palestine.

Indigenous Africans entered the arena of the territorially-unified South Africa at different rates and within different regional constellations of forces. As a result, the construction of a solid mass-based national identity to replace regional and ethnic identities and become a foundation for a cross-ethnic and a cross-racial nationalism was problematic. In addition to the initial heterogeneity of South Africans relative to Palestinian-Arabs, certain colonial cultural attributes penetrated and to some degree colonized indigenous consciousness. Christianity in particular became a medium for the articulation of grievances and mobilization for struggle. While strong separatist sentiments were expressed through independent African churches, it was significant that the latter operated on a terrain constructed by colonialism. Pre-colonial systems of beliefs could not have provided a basis for unified resistance precisely because pre-colonial identity realities were fragmented. In a sense, an exclusionary national identity based on pre-colonial indigenous foundations was a contradiction in terms. Whereas Palestinian-Arabs could refer to a recent history in which they *as a group* had been the majority with unchallenged claim to the territory, indigenous South Africans had to invent such a past or else operate without such unifying symbols. Only with the rise of Africanist tendencies in the 1940s and 1950s such symbols began to be created as part of the wave of liberation struggles in the continent. Earlier attempts to resort

to tradition were localized in nature, reflecting a withdrawal to particular ethno-linguistic territorial identities rather than attempts to reshape identity at the national level.

In conclusion, then, the relative coherence of Palestinian-Arab identity and its links to non-colonial world religious and cultural forces enabled indigenous Palestinians to maintain a group sense totally distinct from that of settlers. In South Africa, the fragmented nature of pre-colonial indigenous identities and their localized nature militated against the construction of a solid comprehensive identity, clearly distinct from that of settlers, and made possible extensive borrowings from the colonial religious and cultural arsenal. The result was a partial incorporation of settlers and indigenous people, making the construction of mutually exclusive identities and societies increasingly unlikely.

The purpose of this section has been to demonstrate the usefulness of the concepts of identity formation and indigenous capacities in comparative inquiry. It should not be taken to mean, though, that one must not study class and state issues or that settler visions and designs are unimportant. The agenda proposed here is aimed at broadening the scope of historical investigation, rather than at totally replacing one set of concerns with another. Given the limited focus of the literature, however, it is likely that an emphasis on aspects hitherto unexplored may hold greater promise of new insights and innovative avenues of research. To the extent that such a focus does stimulate further inquiry, it has managed to achieve its aims.

Racial Formation in South Africa and the USA

This last section suggests a new direction for comparative inquiry based on the insights presented so far. It proposes a comparative historical study of racial identity formation, focusing on indigenous capacities, in South Africa and the United States, two countries whose histories have witnessed protracted and violent struggles centered on the concept of race and its cultural, social and political meanings. The mere notion of racial conflict frequently conjures up images taken from these countries, in fact, and concepts such as white supremacy, defiance campaigns, black power and non-racialism readily come to mind. The sense of common destiny and solidarity between blacks in both places is widespread and it found an expression since the 1980s with the campaign to impose American sanctions on the apartheid regime and the continuing involvement of black American activists in the process of political change in South Africa. In the popular American conception, blacks in South Africa are facing the same problems today as those which were faced by black Americans in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. And indeed, a brief glance at racial images and representations should suffice to show the many affinities between the two countries in this respect.

The similarities in terminology and perceptions coexist, however,

with profound differences in the shape taken by the historical formation of identities in the two cases. Black Americans have constructed a relatively unified collective identity; debates over terminology (Negro, black American, African-American) may reflect sharp political divisions, but they have little to do with the rarely contested group boundaries; all the above terms refer to the same collective. Black South Africans, on the other hand, have been deeply divided on racial and ethnic grounds; the notion of black identity itself is internally contentious and is facing competition from other foci of identity. Concepts such as Black, African, Xhosa and Sotho reflect divergent terminologies as well as struggles over the demarcation of boundaries between and within collectives.

The existing comparative work, surveyed in a previous section, leaves racial identity largely unquestioned; the analysis remains at the level of state policies and does not address the processes by which racial identification emerges and becomes central in popular conceptions, especially regrading non-dominant groups. I suggest, in contrast, that the formation of racial identities should be at the center of concern. The processes which give rise to racial identification need to be studied not only in their own right as major components of social life in these societies, but also in their relations to issues of class, state and culture, all of which shape identities and, in turn, are shaped by them.

The conceptualization and study of race has been a highly controversial topic throughout the 20th century, resulting in some well-known cases in horrifying consequences. There has thus been an understandable reluctance in South African studies to engage seriously with racial and ethnic issues for fear of being complicit with policies of racialism and tribalism (James, 1992 discusses the case of South African sociology). However, race can also become a affirmative premise underlying individual and collective identities, partially overlapping and partially competing with other foci of identity. Far from being a biological concept, it can rather be regarded as "*an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle*" (Omi and Winant, 1986: 68). The concept of racial formation, first introduced by these writers, can be used to analyze the process by which racial identities historically emerge and change through the operation of external and indigenous forces, giving rise to social institutions and practices shaped by racial meanings.

Identity boundaries in the two countries have been affected to a large extent by official state policies, promoting an overall black-white dichotomy (and hence imposed homogeneity on blacks) in the case of the USA, and encouraging multiple racial and ethnic divisions among blacks in South Africa. State policies have been particularly prominent in the latter case in which the divisive strategies of apartheid, carried out in the name of protecting cultural diversity, are well known and have been extensively studied. In line with the focus on indigenous capacities, however, dominant white groups and their policies should be seen primarily as constraints setting the terrain on

which non-dominant groups operate, rather than as the determining factors in black self-identity formation. A research starting from this premise would contribute to filling the current gaps in a field which has so far produced only a few studies of black South African racial and ethnic identities, none of which written from a comparative angle.

The comparative framework should allow us to evaluate the role of different historically formative experiences, slavery in the USA and colonial conquest and settlement in South Africa. A major question emerging in that regard is the importance of the legacies of dispersion, fragmentation and reconstitution of identity, associated with the slave experience of the New World, compared to the maintenance of viable indigenous identities possible in situations of colonial conquest (Appiah, 1992). The interplay between various internally-generated and externally-imposed national, racial, religious, ethnic, tribal and continental identities, provides the people concerned with a variety of raw materials from which to fashion their subjectivities. This process is far from smooth and it may lead to serious internal conflicts.

I approach the issue from the following angle: given the overall similarities in racial discourses in these two white supremacist countries, how can we account for the basic differences in the process of shaping black identities? How can we explain the emergence of a relatively consolidated black identity in the United States as compared to the relatively fragmented and fluctuating black identities in South Africa? The question becomes even more puzzling when we consider that black Americans share a much longer and more intimate existence with whites than their South African counterparts, to the extent that one cannot meaningfully talk about separate white and black American cultures, unaffected by the Africanist presence (Mintz and Price, 1992; Morrison, 1992). The differences in state policies in the two countries go some way toward explaining the issue. To stop at this point would not be enough, however; the historical legacies and the racial discourses themselves need to be investigated. Only by providing an account of the historical changes in the kind of conceptions and visions articulated by writers, artists, scholars, political activists and common people can we attempt to arrive at an explanation of the differences in identity formation processes in the two countries. Cultural forces have their own dynamics which cannot be reduced to any other social and political factors, though no explanation would be complete without the latter.

The period following World War II provides a suitable time frame for such a study, covering the apartheid era in South Africa, the civil rights movement in the United States, the rise of black consciousness in both places and the political transformations of the 1980s and 1990s. It has been a period characterized by an acute awareness of race as a primary factor in the unfolding of social and political developments. Discussions of racial identity formation and conflict should also consider the changing world-historical circumstances: the emergence of the Third World and

the North-South divide, the decolonization of Africa and the rise and possible decline of Pan-African nationalism, and the debates over multiculturalism in academic and popular discourses.

In this limited space I can offer no more than a cursory idea of the matters involved here. The comparative project requires consideration of several issues to be seen against the background of the different historical legacies. Language as a means of incorporation and as a distinguishing mark is one major factor. English in the American context has been a language of domination assimilated by people of all backgrounds as a native tongue. At the same time, it has also been a means of identifying a particular regional, racial and social background. The origins of most black Americans in the slave South, and their later concentration in big industrial centers, gave their English a distinct character which contributes to the creation of a unified sense of identity, sustained by literature, music, religious preaching. Even when the language (or dialect) is not spoken as such in daily life, it still functions as a cultural marker. In South Africa, English is a *lingua franca* for urban and educated Africans but is rarely a first language. People speak at home a variety of languages linked to specific ethno-regional backgrounds. They can communicate in the urban areas in indigenous languages serving as an inter-ethnic medium, but they usually do that without losing their localized identities, the ties to which are maintained by family connections, bases in the countryside and traditions such as initiation schools.

There are many other factors worthy of consideration such as the role of largely urban cultural elites in constructing a sense of comprehensive identity, the struggles of political movements for equal rights as individuals or national liberation as a collective, media images conveyed by selves and others and the spatial organization of racially identified groups in towns and regions. The discussion so far has been far from an exhaustive treatment of racial formation. My main goal in raising the issue in this paper is merely to point out that a potentially rich area of inquiry can be opened once we overcome limited and limiting notions of race (as class, as ideology, as tool in the hands of the state) which served in the past to suggest fruitful directions of investigation, but have increasingly acted as fetters on further quests for creative historical awareness.

CONCLUSIONS

I have attempted in this paper to present an agenda for comparative research and illustrate possible applications. It was not meant as a call to discard all previous scholarship and go where no one has gone before; it aims rather to suggest ways of using existing foundations to expand the horizons of historical and theoretical inquiries. One could possibly reach similar insights without adopting an explicit comparative perspective, but there is no real non-comparative approach. All historical studies are at least implicitly comparative with regard to time, space and theme. No research starts from scratch. An explicitly comparative approach makes it easier to identify analytical

factors and is essential if one wants to go beyond the merely descriptive (important in its own right) and make a contribution to theory by attempting to separate the particular from the general, keeping in mind the inherent limitations of any theoretical effort.

The focus on a historical-theoretical approach, identity formation and indigenous capacities is to a large extent corrective, having the gaps in the available comparative literature in mind. My purpose in introducing these concepts has been to demonstrate how they can be fruitfully applied to the matters at hand and open new areas of investigation. While I do not argue that my approach is necessarily better, rather than just different, from the existing comparative work, I do believe that the new agenda carries the promise of exciting avenues of inquiry whose potential is yet to be fully realized. South African studies have been in a state of creative flux for the last 25 years, from the liberal-Africanist tendencies of the late 1960s through the radical Marxist approaches of the 1970s to the social history school dominating the 1980s. Each new trend stimulated the exploration of new issues and the re-evaluation of old ones. A healthy attitude to the process of production of knowledge would seek to recognize the gains made by previous research agendas while attempting to go beyond them. I hope that this paper will prove to be a contribution towards this process.

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