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POPULARIZING THE PRECOLONIAL PAST: POLITICS AND PROBLEMS

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The importance of history as an ideological weapon hardly needs stressing. It is a safe generalization that all political interest-groups, whether dominant or dominated, invariably seek to legitimize their particular policies and practices by seeking precedents for them in the past. In the process they will, if necessary, reshape and, if they can get away with it, invent the past to suit their purposes. At the same time they will be concerned to neutralize and, if possible, suppress or exorcize that knowledge of the past which informs the political projects of groups opposed to them. Control of the past is, in other words, always a political issue, and history is always a terrain of struggle.[1]

In South Africa the political importance of history is graphically illustrated by the development of Afrikaner nationalist historiography.[2] It is also well recognized by those engaged in the development and social rooting of what is coming to be called People's Education. Thus among the subject committees appointed by the National Education Crisis Committee last year was one set up to develop an alternative to the official history syllabus of the Department of Education and Training.[3] And thus a Soweto student involved in an informal education group could explain that the group was concentrating initially on history 'because it is the one subject through which the oppressor instilled into the black people a sense of inferiority, barbarism and dependence'.[4]

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The self-consciously 'alternative' kind of history which in the last year or so has become widely known in South Africa as People's History has its origins in the post-Soweto period of the late 1970s. It has emerged essentially as anti-apartheid history, i.e. as history written explicitly as a counter to the racist and elitist stereotypes and perversions of the southern African past that have characterized the history propagated, especially in the schools education system, by successive apartheid regimes. It is 'popular' history in that where apartheid history seeks to minimize and demean the historical roles played by the black people who form the great majority of South Africa's population, People's History deliberately seeks to bring the black underclasses into South African history, and at the same time is written primarily for a readership drawn from those classes.

The emergence of this genre of history in South Africa is something that should be greatly welcomed by academic historians, and the expansion of its still exiguous literature a project in which they could be playing a much more active role. Not the least contribution that these historians can make is to provide constructive criticism where it is needed. This paper aims to set out a number of critical comments on one aspect of the popular history that has emerged since about 1980 - its treatment of the precolonial period of southern African history. (By 'precolonial' is meant the period before the establishment of effective colonial rule. Over most of southern Africa this took place in the second half of the 19th century.) Though the approaches to the period exhibited in the popular literature are by no means always uniform, certain features emerge frequently enough in it to provide a focus for some generalized comments.[5]

The most obvious feature of the way in which precolonial history is presented in the popular literature is that, compared with colonial and post-colonial history, it gets relatively little attention. In large part this neglect is due quite simply to the absence of readily available syntheses of southern Africa's precolonial history. The academic study of the period by his-

torians essentially began only in the 1960s, flourished briefly in the 1970s, and then went into decline in the early 1980s as the first generation of precolonial historians, together with their students, moved on to what they felt were more 'relevant' fields of study. The result is that very large areas of southern Africa's past before the mineral discoveries of the late 19th century are still relatively unknown.

But (to anthropomorphize the more easily to generalize) another reason for popular history's neglect of the precolonial period has to do with the nature of the political paradigm in which it is produced. As already indicated, it is a history that has emerged very largely in response to apartheid history. The directness of its engagement gives it, at its best, a great cogency, but at the same time, even where its propositions are diametrically opposed to those of apartheid history, tends to lock it into the same frame of reference. Popular history, in other words, has so far tended in many ways to emerge as a reverse image of apartheid history, to define itself not so much in terms of what it is proposing as in terms of what it is opposing. Thus where apartheid history focusses primarily on post-'great trek' history, so does popular history, even if, instead of highlighting the struggles and 'achievements' of white settlers, and of Afrikaners in particular, it emphasizes popular resistance to, and struggles against, colonialism and apartheid.[6] And as apartheid history pays little attention to the history of precolonial African societies, so too has popular history so far tended to do.

In so far as it does consider the precolonial period, popular history highlights three main themes - the establishment of Iron Age farming societies in the early AD era, the emergence of large states in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and resistance to the intrusions of white settlers. Otherwise the period tends to be treated ethnographically rather than historically. As in apartheid history, descriptions of customs and cultures of societies defined in the vocabulary of contemporary orthodox anthropology - the 'Nguni', the 'Sotho', the 'Tsonga'-

often substitute for explanations of historical continuities and changes. The result, as in apartheid history, is the emergence of a picture of timeless, unchanging societies. Even if they are described in positive terms rather than in the negative terms of apartheid history, they do not emerge as having a real history. Precolonial history thus functions essentially to provide images of an idealized past which can be contrasted with the miseries of life under colonialism and apartheid. The restoration of a positive view of precolonial society should be an important facet of popular history, but when the dynamic element is left out the result is a stereotyping and therefore a mystification of the past. The political implications of this process will be touched on in the conclusion to this paper. To put the argument in context, three features of a common stereotype which by and large remains unchallenged in popular histories will here be discussed further.

In the first place, the stereotype assumes that precolonial societies were politically united and socially homogeneous. This view fails to take into account that states such as those ruled by the Zulu, the Dlamini (Swazi), the Khumalo (Ndebele), the Kwena (Sotho), the Maroteng (Pedi), and others were composed largely of discrete chiefdoms which had been subordinated by, or had given their allegiance to, a dominant chiefdom. The nature of the relations between dominant and subordinate chiefdoms varied widely, but in all these states political tensions between the various chiefdoms provided one of the major dynamics for historical change. Failure to appreciate this means that the political history of these states ends up as the accounts of dynastic struggles and wars with neighbours that are all too familiar from 'colonial' literature.

This view also fails to take into account that in these states there were clear social divisions between an exploitative aristocracy which owned relatively large numbers of cattle and the common people who owned relatively few. These embryonic class divisions tended to co-incide with ethnic divisions. Thus in the Zulu kingdom, the socially superior chiefdoms of the amantungwa category were distinguished on ethnic lines from socially

inferior categories such as those of the amanhlwenga, amathonga, amalala, amazosha, and others. Similar class-cum-ethnic divisions existed in the Swazi and Ndebele kingdoms, and were probably widespread in African states.

To do it justice, some of the popular literature on precolonial societies does take note of the existence of class divisions. Invariably, though, it does so in an 'ethnographic descriptive' rather than a 'historical explanatory' context. Thus descriptions of these societies will note that there were differences in the social positions of rich and poor, powerholders and subjects, aristocracies and commoners. But when it comes to explanations of political change the role of class factors is largely disregarded, and the reader tends to be left with various determinist or even 'Great Man' notions of change.[7]

The stereotype also tends to take for granted the divisions that existed in African societies on lines of sex and of age. It does not consider that relations between men and women, and between older people and younger, were sites of struggle, and therefore cannot conceive of changes in gender relations and in age-group relations such as took place with the rise and later the collapse of states such as those mentioned above. Nor can it find room for a history of the family, or of women.

In the second place, the stereotype tends to see African polities as having been united in their struggles against the establishment of white domination and colonial rule. This is a view which derives largely from ideologies developed in the course of political struggles in the late 19th and the 20th centuries. At many times and places the struggle against colonialism did strengthen unity within and between African societies, but at other times and places it brought about disunity and political fragmentation. The stereotype obscures the fact that in the precolonial period, relations between Africans and whites were far more fluid and flexible than they became in the 20th century, when they took the form essentially of relations between a dominant boss class and a subordinated worker class. It is a distortion of the evidence to see Africans in the 19th century as all arranged

together on one side of a frontier, with all whites on the other. This view which is common to apartheid history and to anti-apartheid popular history alike, gives no idea of the complexities of cross-frontier political alliances, especially in the period before the 1880s. In what is now the eastern Transvaal region, whites sought alliances with black allies against other whites, as well as against other blacks; and blacks sought alliances with whites against other blacks, as well as against other whites. Further south, the factions within the Zulu leadership frequently sought to make alliances against their rivals with either the Boers in the Transvaal or the British in Natal.

In the same vein, the point needs to be made that in probably every war that white people have fought against black people in southern Africa, they have had other blacks fighting on their side. The British regulars who fought a long succession of wars against Xhosa-speaking people in the 19th century were invariably assisted by Xhosa-speaking and other black auxiliaries. Natal Africans fought on the side of the British against the Zulu in the war of 1879. Swazi soldiers played a major role in the British defeat of the Pedi in that same year. Numerous other examples could be cited. The various groups of people who defined themselves as whites should be seen not as a homogeneous group of conquerors sweeping across the land but as intrusive communities, themselves often internally divided, that intervened in, or were drawn into, pre-existing patterns of political conflict. In the process, subordinate groups in African polities often made alliances with white groups against the established leadership. African politics in the 19th century need to be seen in their own terms, not in terms of the very different politics of the 20th century.

In the third place, the stereotype sees colonial rule as having been imposed and maintained primarily by force. At a reductionist level this is true: some of the most violent and destructive wars in Africa's history were fought to establish European colonial rule in the southern part of the continent, and the maintenance of white domination in South Africa has always depended on the use of violence against black people. But the stereotype fails to take note of the articulation between precolonial and

colonial forms of domination and exploitation. Colonial administrators in southern Africa, as in the rest of Africa, were not usually in a position to rule by force alone: they often relied heavily on policies of divide and rule which took advantage of pre-existing political and social cleavages within African society. Thus they took advantage of succession disputes to make alliances with one faction against another. They exploited pre-existing forms of ethnic discrimination to split subject groups off from rulers and to create out of them new and often co-operative administrative 'tribes'. As is well known, they very often did not assume direct authority over their African subjects but ruled them through hierarchies of 'traditional' chiefs and sub-chiefs according to 'native law', which was based partly on the impositions of the colonial administrators, and partly on customary law as interpreted by the collaborative collectivity of chiefs. They exploited pre-existing gender divisions and patterns of female subordination in order to thrust onto women the prime responsibility of maintaining households whose basic structures were changing under the impact of migrant labour and the penetration of market relations. They exploited pre-existing age-hierarchies in order to try to keep control over a migrant labour force composed largely of young unmarried men.[8]

One response to the comments made above might be to dismiss them as academic, and as irrelevant - or, worse, divisive - in the context of present-day popular struggles against apartheid. In answer to this kind of charge two points need to be made. First, that for popular historians to neglect precolonial history is to leave the field wide open for annexation by the ideologues of ethnic nationalisms. In recent years ethnically based political movements in southern Africa, particularly in the bantustans but also in places like Swaziland, have moved with varying degrees of effectiveness to seize on the precolonial past in order to provide themselves with a mantle of legitimacy. In the bantustans the clearest example of this is to be seen in the way in which the leaders of the Inkatha movement have for a decade and more manipulated Zulu 'traditional' history.

The most effective exponent of the Inkatha version of history is the Chief Minister of KwaZulu, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Throughout his political career, Chief Buthelezi has taken every opportunity of publicly proclaiming a version of Zulu history which focusses on the 19th century Zulu kings as the founders and guardians of a unified Zulu nation and as the leaders of a heroic resistance to the establishment of colonial domination. In this view, the present-day Zulu royal house and its close associates, including Chief Buthelezi, are, by virtue of their genealogical and 'spiritual' links with the past kings, the natural and therefore legitimate leaders of Zulu people today, wherever they are to be found, and whatever their walks of life. Lacking as he does a national political base, Chief Buthelezi has successfully exploited a localized ethnic past to help provide himself and Inkatha with a strong regional base.

The Inkatha version of history can be seen as 'popular' in that it is produced primarily for consumption by a section of the oppressed people of South Africa; but in that it focusses on great men, and does not recognize a division of interests between leaders and led among Zulu people either in the past or in the present, it is in effect strongly elitist. It makes powerful emotional appeals to working-class Zulu people, but it does so by celebrating an imaginary unity of the Zulu 'nation' now and in the past, and by recalling the military 'glories' of the Zulu kingdom. It thus appeals to their 'Zulu-ness' rather than to their common membership of a nationally oppressed and exploited working class. It belongs to that brand of ideology which Stuart Hall has called 'authoritarian populism',[9] and, because of its ethnic exclusivism, can be seen in the context of South African national politics as a profoundly divisive force. It seems hardly necessary to argue the case that popular-democratic (to use Hall's term again) historians need to contest it on its own terrain of precolonial history by bringing out the role of the underclasses in the history of the Zulu kingdom; and by revealing how Zulu ethnicity, like all ethnicities, was not something primordial and fixed, but was created and continually refashioned - as it continues to be today - by sectional political interests.

Second, to downplay the existence of social and political divisions within and between African societies in the precolonial past is in effect to discount the importance of the struggles in those societies of subordinate groups and of common people, and to give legitimacy to a view of history which highlights the role of dominant groups. It is also to obscure the ways in which, in the course of those struggles, ethnicities were shaped and reshaped, and thus in effect to leave unchallenged the enormously pervasive view that ethnic groups are not so much products of history as part of the 'natural' order. On both counts it is a partial surrender to apartheid history, in that it is to accept elitism and ethnicism as largely unproblematic. It is to accept the terrain of struggle as apartheid history defines it, instead of seeking to shift the site of the struggle altogether. A genuinely People's History cannot develop in South Africa until its exponents extend their concern with issues of class and ethnic conflict in the more recent past to include the precolonial period.

It is entirely appropriate - and necessary - that popular history should take as its starting point the popular struggles being waged against apartheid in the present. But if it is to be history for liberation rather than history for continued oppression then it needs to recognize more clearly that these struggles are in many ways shaped by forces that have their origins in the precolonial period of southern Africa's history, and to address itself to portraying the nature of those forces to its readers.

NOTES

My thanks go to Carolyn Hamilton and to the staff of Sached in Pietermaritzburg for their critical comments on preliminary drafts of this paper.

1. John Tosh, The Pursuit of History, London, 1984, ch.1, makes some useful comments on the political importance of what he calls 'the sanction of the past'.

2. See T. Dunbar Moodie, The Rise of Afrikanerdom, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1975, pp. xvii-xviii, 1-11, 18-21, & chs. 2, 9; Leonard Thompson, The Political Mythology of Apartheid, New Haven & London, 1985; J.M. du Preez, Africana Afrikaner: Master Symbols in South African School Textbooks, Alberton, 1983.

3. Reports in Sunday Times, 7 December 1986, Star, 8 December 1986, Weekly Mail, 5-11 December 1986.

4. Report in Weekly Mail, 17-23 October 1986.

5. The comments that follow are based on a reading of the following sources (listed in order of publication):

   Luli Callinicos, Gold and Workers, Johannesburg, 1980

   Learn and Teach, 'History of South Africa', Johannesburg (1980?), chs. 1-10

   Learning Post, series of history articles, 9 March 1980 - 19 October 1980

   Upbeat, vol. 1, no. 1, March 1981, onwards

   Prezanian Comix & E.D.A., 'Vusi Goes Back', Johannesburg, 1982

   Turret Correspondence College, African Studies Course, Book 3 part B ('Colonialism in Africa 1880 to 1930'), Book 4 parts A & B ('Resistance to Colonialism'), Johannesburg, 1981-2

   Fosatu Worker News, series on the making of the working class, issue no. 24, August 1983, onwards

   New Nation, People's History series, issue of 23 October - 5 November 1986 onwards

   Dept. of Education, University of Cape Town, 'Precolonial South Africa' and 'The Mfecane', Cape Town (1986)

   Economic History Research Group, 'The Struggle for the Land', South African History series, no. 1, Cape Town, n.d.

Useful critical points are to be found in H.E. Webster, 'Some thoughts on popularising precolonial history', paper presented to workshop on precolonial history, University of Cape Town, 1986.

6. Thus the series of articles on People's History currently appearing in New Nation was advertised as intending to focus specifically on 'the struggles of the people in urban and rural areas': see the issue of 9-22 October 1986.

7. The same point applies to some of the avowedly socialist schools text books which have been published in Zimbabwe since independence. See for instance M. Sibanda et al., The African Heritage, Harare, 1982; P. Garlake & A. Proctor, People Making History, Harare, 1985.

8. An 'alternative' history which does challenge some of the stereotypes outlined here is Turret Correspondence College's African Studies Course, Book 4 part A ('Resistance to colonialism'), where the treatment of 'collaboration' is notably sensitive.

9. S. Hall, 'Popular-democratic vs authoritarian populism: two ways of "taking democracy seriously"', in Alan Hunt, ed., Marxism and Democracy, London, 1980, pp.175-85. Other useful discussions of the various strands of populist ideology are to be found in R. Samuel, 'People's history', in R. Samuel, ed., People's History and Socialist Theory, London, 1981, pp. xv-xxxix; and Ernesto Laclau, Politics and Ideology in Marxist theory, London, 1977, ch.4. See also the comments of Jeremy Cronin in 'The question of unity - a reply', SA Labour Bulletin, vol. 11, no. 3 (January 1986), pp. 31-2, on populism in the current South African context.