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HISTORY FOR DEMOCRACY

A preliminary critique of the presentation of history in white South African Schools, with a view to the future.
(Some of these ideas were presented in a paper delivered at the History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, 1987)

People's Education, although tremendously evocative, remains essentially undefined. In a recent paper, educationist Johan Muller has given an eloquent account of what was, in some senses, a premature delivery.

People's Education came out into the world, bloodied by renewed state repression, in the wake of the banning of COSAS (Congress of South African Students) and the break-down of the final DET examinations at the end of 1985. But its appearance was exciting and invigorating, a live birth after all, for it connoted an important change in oppositional strategy.

Growing despair about what was happening to schools in the townships and to students

themselves led many students to favour the slogan: 'Liberation before education.' But at the NCC (National consultative conference) at which 145 organisations were represented, held at Wits in December 1985, speakers argued for transformation from within - using the state schools themselves. The theme of the conference 'People's Education for People's Power' captured the imagination of people with diverse progressive political allegiances and quickly acquired a national compulsion and international support. But, while this was a remarkable feat, it meant that there were potential problems too. For it appealed simultaneously to the heady euphoria of those who thought the final countdown to The Revolution had begun and to those who warned grimly that the struggle would be long and hard and the road to a truly democratic education a tedious and treacherous one.

Among the latter could be counted national chairman of the NECC (National Education Crisis Committee) Vusi Khanyile, who carefully stressed that the call for People's

Education was not for academically inferior education and that its implementation would entail discipline and hard work.

Muller points out that there was no time for the weighty considerations of curriculum issues that this demanded and that the immensely complex issues of accountability in education were, likewise, stowed away in the rush to deliver some tangible package.

Some very competent academics were involved in this rush job and were harshly criticised in some quarters, notably by Wits Professor Es'kia Mphahlele in an article in The Sowetan, in which he accused certain academics of 'intellectual dishonesty', for promising to deliver alternative educational material, before they could possibly have reflected sufficiently on the philosophical basis of an alternative educational system.

My impression is that the feverish rush to produce material, particularly in English and history, was less the product of 'intellectual dishonesty' than of a well-intentioned frenzy to take advantage of the gap created

by the State's momentary dithering at the end of 1986. Furthermore, many people embraced the history commission's pack, intended only to be used in the classroom as supplementary material, as a new 'text-book' because, for any shortcomings it may have had, it represented ~~an~~ unimaginable advance on all that had gone before.

Since then the State has composed itself and has decided that People's Education represents a real enough threat and harsh new restrictions have been introduced to suffocate it in its infancy if possible and to incapacitate many of its progenitors. It is another setback for the apocalyptic vision of the Revolution. But, perhaps there can now be more considered reflection on what democratic education might mean. Indeed, there are signs that such a process has been set in motion. In the last month a meeting has been held under the aegis of Tuata - (Transvaal United African Teachers' Association.) Some of the speakers talked about looking beyond the 'narrow view' of People's Education and trying to determine how best to meet 'black aspira-

tions.'

People's Education was intended from the outset to be a unitary educational system but I have an uneasy feeling that somewhere along the line the iniquities in white education have been forgotten. It is a strange and unusual complaint. But it is important to try to understand how 'white' education fails to equip students for democracy. Since most of my experience and observations are rooted in the 'white' education system, it is this angle I would like to take. In particular, I would like to pose the question: How can the teaching of history help prepare students for participation in a democratic society?

At the height of People's Education fever one of the academics who had been approached by the NECC for help with producing alternative material, historian Colin Bundy, was quoted by The Star as saying: 'History as taught in South African schools ... not only distorts the past, but maims it. In content it is exclusive, elitist and shallow, it is silent or misleading on the

historical experience of the majority of South Africans.' Essentially I think one can have no quibble with Bundy's critique. There are gaping and profound 'silences' in South African school history, the most obvious being the absence of the history of resistance, other than that of Gandhi's passive resistance campaign, which we are meant to assume culminated in the full recognition of Indian rights for all time.

The grotesque deformities of the past are also everywhere in evidence. In white junior primary history classes, children are still learning about how little Helena Lotrie saved the life of her wounded father by spreading her skirts to catch the deadly spears of the fierce black hordes.

But the notion of 'the past' conveyed by Bundy in this particular instance has overtones of a solid and tangible past, which simply awaits discovery and revelation by a more honest set of historians. That, to me, is an immeasurable simplification of the historical process. Historical interpretations are constantly shifting and the views of the past which they deliver, change accor-

dingly.

The truth about the past in history does not lie waiting as a reward for those who faithfully follow the requirements of the quest. It is elusive and complex and the quest itself infinite. Historians might feel that they are uncovering part of the truth or that they have some sense of the whole, but even so, the wisest among them know to keep in reserve the feeling that they may have been duped. Historians, like archaeologists, work with many tangible artefacts, but they understand that these are witnesses (most often partial) to reality and not reality itself.

I want to argue that the iniquities in our school history amount to more than the silences and distortions in South African history brought about by omissions or inaccuracies in content. It is the way students are taught to regard the past and the discipline of history which ensures that they are usually fundamentally passive recipients of so-called 'historical knowledge' and that, even when they sense that something is

wrong, they do not know how to raise an effective challenge.

For three years I have tried to give my own second year college students an overview of Anglo-Zulu War historiography, culminating in a decisive refutation of the thesis that culpability for the War lay with aggressive, maturing Zulu men, impatient to be initiated into manhood through 'washing their spears in blood'. I have presented students with relatively recent writings which argue that, on the contrary, it was the machinationsof various British officials which were responsible for the outbreak of War in 1879. Students have become incensed with the 'wicked' British imperialists and although most of them are white, I have sensed quite genuine indignation and an imaginative empathy with the thousands of Zulu who suffered cruelly during and after the War.

Then I have shown the by now rather worn copy of the film Zulu made in 1963. Ironically,in this film, it is the British soldiers whose manhood is forged in battle. Its view-

point is from within the tiny camp at Rorke's Drift faced with wave after wave of 'savage' Zulu warriors. This last year the students were warned of the film's bias. But they quickly became intensely involved in the action and there was general cheering every time a Zulu warrior was slain.

At the next lecture I asked the students: 'Who did you side with in the film?' There was a chorus of 'The British' and then a deep, shamed silence. One student then called out 'But they made us, they made us side with the British'. (Her emphasis)

I was alarmed by the mass transfer of allegiance effected by a third rate movie. They claimed that they had been coerced, but it was only with considerable guidance that they were able to identify the mechanisms of manipulation and coercion. One of the students was bold enough to claim that it was I as lecturer who had been manipulative. Her comment is illuminating 'Ms Kros,' she wrote subsequently, 'indoctrinated us about the Anglo-Zulu War with facts and slides'. Left to themselves, the students

were unable to make a real choice between the two versions of 'the past' with which they had been confronted. For them, both versions had the solid appearance of 'fact'.

In the case of the SABC's Shaka Zulu a similar trend is exemplified. Academic historians have waxed eloquent about the distortions but many non-academic viewers enjoyed the series and thought of it as 'true'. Critic Willie Currie may talk about the implications of positioning the viewer on the side of the profligate Henry Fynn, but the question of viewpoint does not occur to most of the viewers.

Historian Julian Cobbing questions the evidence Shaka Zulu was based on, calling the Fynn diaries a 'series of fantasy articles' written long after Shaka's death and subsequently moulded for specific political purposes. Cobbing provocatively suggests that Shaka was really a weak, ineffectual king caught up in a process of change and re-orientation - at about the furthest remove from the 'vengeful, brutal and ambitious despot' Currie describes being shown on

SABC TV. But what does all this wrangling about evidence mean to the thousands of viewers who have taken Henry Cele's Shaka to their hearts, much as they once took Larry Hagman's J.R.?

Most viewers are not in a position to detect bias, standpoint or any of the ideological sleights of hand which the academics see at once. It is not all the fault of their education but white schooling has fostered a deep passivity which is at least partially responsible for what a repentant Albert Speer describes as 'an atrophy of moral sensitivity', the very condition that enabled Hitler to co-opt the Weimar intellectuals.

Antonio Gramsci, reflecting on the influence of Fascism on Italian education in the early 1920s and trying to envisage an alternative, in the confines of his prison cell wrote: 'Democracy must mean that every citizen can govern and that society places him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this.'

My observation of matric writings convinces me that, on the whole, the basic tools for historical understanding are absent. I have studied about 200 essays recently, on Modern European history, safely removed from the tumultous concerns of South African history, one would have thought. The student authors are predominantly, but by no means all white. However, most come from middle class backgrounds.

In these writings there is a lack of analysis beyond simplistic racial or national typifications. Thus, students conclude that the Weimar Republic, which preceded Hitler's regime, was an inherently fragile democracy. They suggest that its failure was pre-determined because the German people were not used to democracy. It never occurs to them to ask how 'used' other people in Europe were to democracy. Universal male suffrage was only granted in 1918 in England, for example. If we distil the most important reason for Weimar's failure out of the myriad of complex arguments advanced by scholars, we might see that the Weimar Republic was not a full demo-

cracy. It entrenched the power and privileges of the landowners and employers whereas the majority of Germans were workers. It failed to match expectations because it was not a real democracy. this is very different from saying that the German people couldn't 'work' democracy because they were unfamiliar with it. But. the impression persists, partly reinforced by careless textbook writing, that some people/nations are better suited to democracy than others.

When race or national origin are not used to account for historical phenomena, individual personalities are. So, according to these students, Hitler's imperialist fantasies were actually fuelled by the cowardly Neville Chamberlain, who sought to appease him at all costs. The contraints on Chamberlain - his electorate's war-weariness, the distraction posed by Bolshevism and the state of British military resources and their rationalisation - are rarely mentioned.

Historical individuals are not contextualised within their specific period and societies.

They act idiosyncratically and often make their way presumptously into the present. Chamberlain is the softie who would let 'terrorists' get their way; Churchill is the arch-guru and eternal guardian angel of 'democracy'. He is never seen as a conservative politician who rejoiced on the occasion of Britain's first test explosion of the A-bomb with the words: 'we had one and we let it off and it went off beautifully!' Hitler becomes an odd and not totally reprehensible mixture of strong-man Rambo, rising out of the ruins of Weimar to 'save his country' and of Ronald Reagan, in his more lucid moments, devising cunning plans to revive the economy. The statistics of economic recovery in Germany after 1933 are not subjected to scrutiny and the possibility that political discrimination against women and Jews may have helped to shrink the unemployment figures, is never looked at.

The students are unable to identify the political viewpoints, either of the historical actors themselves, or of those who are telling their story. They are taught that politics has no place in 'real' history, just

as they are taught that political policies and economic policies must always be studied separately, as if they had no bearing whatsoever on each other. the students do not know how to weigh up and evaluate reasons and causes - these have been reduced to lists for memorisation, robbed of their explanatory value. They do not know how to assess the validity of the evidence they are presented with because they do not understand its partial and value laden nature. They do not even know that historians work with evidence and that history is not ready made.

This is only partly the fault of the much maligned textbooks. Some of them are atrocious and are promoted by an exam system which blatantly favours the worst of them. But there are approved textbooks, such as those by A.N. Boyce, which at least offer the vista of alternative views. the problems are more complex than poor textbooks. current ideology interposes itself between the subject and the student's understanding of it - one needs only to see how often the word 'unrest' crops upin essays

ranging from the Sudeten crisis to pre-revolutionary Russia. The relationship between past and present is a vexed one and, of course, there are ways in which the past intrudes on the present. But, rudely to break down the barriers between past and present and to use the past as a kind of allegory for the present is nothing less than propaganda.

Teachers contend with a cultural milieu that glorifies Rambo-Reagan and often with their own inadequate training or syllabus paranoia. Even if they once received a sound methodological training, a few years in a school puts them in a desperate panic to 'cover all the facts' and 'discuss later - if there's time'.

In Denis Hirson's recent autobiography: The House Next Door to Africa, there is a wonderful satire of the way South African history is taught at white schools.

History, from van Riebeeck's landing at the Cape to plant vegetables up to South Africa's mining revolution, is mercilessly

compressed. the voortrekkers gallop across the plains, 'slitting lions and turning them into shoes' when they are not warring with the 'marauding tribes' in 'the empty interior'. With a few breathless changes of identity the voortrekkers become Afrikaners and the marauding tribesmen are lining up for health inspections before going down the mines.

It is not 'the silences' that offend in Hirson's account, for everything happens so quickly that we can hardly be conscious of them. Everyone is packed into the story; no one is left out, except possibly some of South Africa's indigenous inhabitants prior to 1652. but there is no time to ask 'How did the tribesmen become workers?' or, 'How did the voortrekkers become Afrikaners?' What kinds of explanations do historians offer for these processes? It is a monologue delivered at break-neck speed, by a teacher with her eye on the number of periods left before the exams and on the door through which the inspector might come at any moment. It is a senseless, mind-numbing monologue which pretends to be a 'factual' account, but its very lack

of coherence means that the students can never intervene. They can never do anything with it, except learn it off like a catechism.

How then can they take even the first, hesitant step towards the 'moral and intellectual creativity, autonomy and initiative' that Gramsci, in his prison dreams, envisaged for the 'mature scholar' who would be able to control those who governed him? How will they ever acquire the skills of logical thinking, which Gramsci argued were rarely automatic but which, once acquired, could lead students to their own intellectual revelations and to mastery?

Gramsci's own programme, influenced by his historical position and his personal suffering, was rigorous and rather inflexible. His emphasis on formal Latin grammar and the classics is a little shocking to the imported liberalism in South Africa, which favours open ended and pupil centred learning. But his concerns for teaching all students the skills of logic and analysis, while simultaneously giving them an insight into the breadth of vision he imputed to the classical

authors, are of considerable interest.

In a democratic education system in South Africa what role will the teacher play? Will there be a planned programme of study? What will the desired end-point be? How will the difficult issues of intellectual autonomy and political accountability be resolved? Is intellectual autonomy on the agenda? These are some of the questions I think need to be discussed and worked through carefully by all the interested parties, and the extraordinary hopes that People's Education for People's Power aroused may yet be vindicated.