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NEW NATION: NEW HISTORY
THE HISTORY WORKSHOP IN SOUTH AFRICA 1979 - 1994

By P.L. Bonner

This article seeks to appraise the influence of the History Workshop (based at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa) both on the study of history in South Africa and on popular understandings of the past. This is a hazardous and perhaps foolhardy venture. Most historians of the sub-continent would agree that a revolution occurred in the writing of the history of South Africa in the later 1970s and 1980s, but to isolate the role of the History Workshop from a variety of other local and international influences is both difficult and , in its outcome, almost certainly controversial. To assess the impact of the History Workshop on popular perceptions of history is even more problematical, through want of virtually any kind of data or even of appropriate measures. All that will be attempted here is to indicate what parts of the wider public the History Workshop has succeeded in reaching. The chief reason for even attempting such an exercise is that the popularisation of South African history is so centrally a part of the History Workshop project that even the strictly academic side of its activities cannot be understood in isolation from it.

The History Workshop was founded in 1977 by a group of academics drawn from a number of disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand. The date was not without significance, for at that time both the discipline and the wider society in South Africa were in turmoil. Since the late 1960s and more particularly the early 1970s a radical critique of liberal and conservative South African historiography had been underway, spearheaded by South African scholars based at a number of university centres in England, and this had been making a growing impact on younger academics and undergraduates in South Africa (1). Outside of the universities, South Africa in general, and the Witwatersrand in particular had been

convulsed by student insurrection in Soweto which began on June 16 1976, and rumbled through the first half of 1977.

One consequence of that insurrection was that the parents and teachers of Soweto students who were either boycotting school or had been expelled began to seek alternative education, and classes were mounted by academics and teachers from the University of the Witwatersrand and elsewhere in the showground adjacent to the University. Teaching history in that environment brought into sharp relief the alienation of African students from school history and indeed from written histories of South Africa in general (2). This awareness was by no means new even in the still largely segregated ivory towers of white English speaking academe. Following the 1973 strikes of black workers in Durban, a group of white radical academics and students and black political and worker leaders had formed the Institute for Industrial Education for the fledgling trade union movement. Similar groups followed suit in other centres and began to write courses on a variety of subjects, including labour history. The dearth of written resources on African labour history led some to pursue research in this field, mostly of a rather mechanical reductionist sort and generally with an institutional trade union bias (3). The Soweto student rebellion added urgency to these efforts and broadened the focus of analysis and research to 'the oppressed people' as a whole, in all aspects of their life. It was in this context and in response to these needs that the History Workshop was formed.

The History Workshop was by no means an exclusively South African construction. Many of its formative intellectual influences were imported from the outside, firstly from the new revisionist history being crafted by (sometimes exiled) South African scholars in England, and secondly from the History Workshop movement at Oxford University. The University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop in many ways represents an attempt to synthesise these two traditions and recast them within a local idiom. At the time of the South African History Workshop's

formation the dominant intellectual current in radical South African history was an instrumentalist, structuralist Marxism, in which human activity and agency barely figured at all. This may have reflected in part the apparently passive and submissive posture of South Africa's black population in the 1960s and early 1970s. During the 1976 student insurrection, however, class and popular struggles once again stirred. Human consciousness and agency reclaimed their place as important objects of study and the social history of the Ruskin History Workshop began to offer what some felt were more useful tools of analysis and explanation (4). To promote research of this kind, and to make it popularly available to those engaged in these struggles thereafter became the central objects of the South African based History Workshop.

Since 1977 the History Workshop has sought to implement these objectives in a variety of ways which have gradually developed over time. Starting in 1978, Triennial Conferences have been mounted whose aim has been to provide a local focus and impetus for the writing of history from below. Over the years these have grown both in scale and in scope. The first conference took as its theme **Labour Townships and Protest**. Its expressed aim was 'recreating Witwatersrand history from a grass-roots perspective', although a cluster of papers were contributed on the local history of Cape Town (5). The second conference held in 1981 was still Witwatersrand centred, but widened its range to include rural history and the rest of the province of the Transvaal (6). Subsequent conferences have broadened their themes still further to embrace the whole of South Africa, and in the forthcoming conference of July 1994, the entire continent of Africa (7). Numbers attending the Conferences likewise expanded, the first two conferences attracting between 30 and 40 contributions, and the last two drawing close to and in excess of 100.

Most practitioners of history in South Africa and many in related disciplines would agree that these conferences, together with the edited volumes and special issues of journals which they yielded

have had a major impact on the writing of South African history and on South African students in general. In the course of the 1980s, an explosive expansion of local and cultural studies undertaken by South African based historians and post-graduates occurred. An enormously fruitful interdisciplinary exchange also took place between historians, sociologists, social anthropologists, political scientists and students of African literature (8). Oral testimonies were collected on an unprecedented scale, and issues of culture, gender and ethnicity began to figure prominently in the studies that emerged (race for the most part being a notable absentee) (9). Among the most significant developments of this period was the growth of local centres of post-graduate studies. Formerly the most able South African students proceeded overseas to pursue their post-graduate education. Now growing and increasingly influential numbers undertook post-graduate studies at home. A significant part of these developments was the result of the stimulus and focus provided by the History Workshop. Most aspects of the historical profession in South Africa, from the composition of its practitioners to its content, its methodology and its scale of production thus bear its impression. " The decolonisation of South African history " which was called for in the first triennial conference has in important respects been achieved (10).

This article has as its subject the History Workshop but it would be seriously misleading if it were to dwell on the role of the History Workshop in these processes alone. Many of the intellectual currents which informed the work of the History Workshop continued to flow from the outside - the mid to late 1980s were, for example a period of close cooperation with the American Social History Project under the direction of Herbert Gutman, and Steven Brier (11). Much seminal work in the field of South African social history continued to be produced in Britain and elsewhere, the most notable examples being the collections edited by Marks and Rathbone and Marks and Trapido (12). Throughout this period the History Workshop and other

centres of South African studies, particularly in England, interacted intimately, with representatives of each participating, in each others' conferences and featuring in each others' publications (13). In South Africa itself academics from the University of Cape Town mounted seminars and a conference on the local history of the Cape in the late 1970s and early 1980s, while in the early to mid 1980s a distinct school of Natal studies began to take shape centred in the University of Natal. To disentangle the role of the History Workshop from all of these other influences is next to impossible. All that can be said with any certainty is that it provided a major local focus for a radical South African social history.

The activities of the History Workshop should also not be abstracted from its wider social context. Much of the impact of the History Workshop can be attributed to its ability to channel some of the social and intellectual energy pulsing through South African society at that time. The late 1970s and 1980s were a period of intensifying challenge to the apartheid state from below. At the centre of these struggles were student and labour movements, who began to articulate demands for People's Education, and People's History. Academics, aspiring academics and activists alike began to perceive a political need for historical and other academic studies both to provide a better understanding of South African society with which to map the way forward and to restore to the mass of the population a history of which they had been deprived. History thus became a major resource in the struggle for emancipation in South Africa, and its production a great source of excitement and contention. There were costs as well as benefits in this highly charged environment, as politically motivated practitioners sometimes attempted to determine research priorities in the short-term interest of 'the struggle' or to dictate politically acceptable lines. The advantages, however, far outweighed the losses, and helped generate an explosion of historical enquiry and historical writing , much of it meeting the most rigorous scholarly standards (14).

It was the wider political context of South Africa that also helped to define the second major purpose of the History Workshop - to make accessible the scholarly findings of the new school of social history and to encourage the writing of local histories by local communities themselves. Since 1978 the History Workshop has been responsible for three popular illustrated histories written by Luli Callinicos, the second of which won the Noma prize for publishing in Africa (15), three booklets on particular historical themes (16), a series of 29 historical articles for the newspaper **New Nation** which were subsequently collected together in the volume **New Nation: New History**, a **Write Your Own History** Manual (17), a series of five teachers conferences on new issues in South African history, and a six part television documentary entitled **Soweto: A History**. The impact of these publications, productions and conferences is difficult to gauge, but at the very least seems appreciable. The Callinicos volumes, in particular, have sold well at trade union congresses and at popular cultural events. They have also been extensively used in undergraduate history at the University of the Western Cape and the University of South Africa (UNISA) along with Leslie Witz's **Write Your Own History**, and the History Workshop's slide and tape show and booklet **Fight Where We Stand** (which focuses on squatter movements in Soweto) (18). Both institutions have undergraduate history enrolments numbering in the thousands (UNISA being a correspondence based university), which include large percentages of coloureds and Africans. The University of the Western Cape, in particular, has used these materials to guide 'Write Your Own History' projects being undertaken by undergraduates, which in one year involved 1200 students (19).

The **New Nation** series of historical articles can confidently be said to have been well received by the newspaper's mainly African readership. The circulation of the **New Nation** at the time that these articles appeared was 80 000, while its estimated readership was five times that figure (20). Numerous letters to the letter page of the **New Nation** testified to the popularity of the series as did the selling out of two print runs of the

selection of articles from that series published under the title **New Nation, New History**. The teachers' conferences for their part have attracted a wider and wider cross section of teachers from South African schools, and have fed into a wider process of rewriting school history curricula and text books. Responses to the television series **Soweto: A History** is as yet unknown. It was screened in Britain and Australia shortly before South Africa's recent general election but will only be shown on South African television later this year. The series attempts to explain both growth of community and conflict in Soweto from the early 1930s to the early 1990s, and is likely to have the widest public impact of all of the History Workshop's productions. We hope, among other things, that it will promote a better understanding of the roots of recent conflicts and aid in the process of future reconciliation.

Many of the History Workshop's more popular publications and productions have been launched at the Open Days/Festivals of Popular Culture which have accompanied each of the Triennial Conferences. These have grown steadily more ambitious over the years, and since 1984 have featured dozens of exhibitions, plays, music and dance troupes, mimes, poetry readings and lectures. In the early 1980s these were one of the principal ways in which the University of the Witwatersrand opened its portals to the wider community. During this period attendances swelled from 1000 in 1981 to 3000 in 1987 and 4000 plus in 1990 and included large numbers of trade unionists and students from the neighbouring black townships. As popular cultural festivals they have only been rivalled by two cultural days organised by the trade union federations, FOSATU and COSATU in the early and late 1980s respectively. Among their distinguishing features were their multi-racial composition and an air of festivity and celebration, which was perhaps most evident in the 1984 and 1990 public days. The changing character of these events from 'Open Days' to 'Festivals' has drawn criticism from some that educational and historical content has been diluted and that they have become detached from the academic business of the Conference (21). There

may be some justice to these charges, but the Open Days have nevertheless collectively constituted perhaps the principal popular cultural events of the 1980s, which may perhaps be regarded as an achievement in itself.

Such criticisms of the Open Days echo others made of the History Workshop in its more narrow academic role. Some of these have appeared in print in recent reviews of the History Workshop's work (22). Others I have canvassed personally among fellow historians and social scientists in other universities prior to writing this article. In these various correspondences and reviews a number of limitations and blindspots in the History Workshop's academic output have been pinpointed. The first of these is that insufficient synthetic work has been undertaken by the History Workshop, so that the History Workshop's publications figure mostly in the final year undergraduate and post-graduate teaching. It is perhaps a reflection of this absence that the History Workshop publications most commonly used in first year undergraduate teaching are its popular histories written by Luli Callinicos (23). The second major shortcoming identified by the History Workshop's critics is that it has made insufficient impression on African historians in South Africa. There is again some substance to this charge. The dissemination of social history and History Workshop publications into the historically black universities has undoubtedly been and slow. Some progress has been made where post-graduates of the University of the Witwatersrand and others associated with the History Workshop have taken up positions in these institutions (the University of Boputhatswana and the University of the Transkei for example). The Universities of the Western Cape and Durban-Westville, partly under the same influence and partly independently have also moved rather more rapidly in the same direction. In other historically black universities, however, history departments have been under the sway of more conservative African academics who have been impervious to social history and have tended to see it as a source of political subversion (24). In these sectors of higher education the impact of the History Workshop has been minimal,

as has been the case with the principal Afrikaans language universities as well. An even more serious problem for the History Workshop are the small numbers of African post-graduates working within this field, although the changing composition of the History Workshop testifies to significant progress in recent years in this direction. The final criticism either whispered or voiced is that the History Workshop has become too predictable, self-satisfied and bland. This may to some extent itself be a measure of success, and indicates the extent to which the History Workshop work has been absorbed into the mainstream of academic history. Nevertheless, to the extent that this is so, we are hoping that the forthcoming Conference which is Africa-wide in scope and composition will counteract this trend and that the Workshop will be able to respond creatively to the challenges of a new South Africa in Africa.

NOTES

1. See for example. B. Bozzoli and P. Delius 'Radical History and South African Society', **Radical History Review**, 46/7, 1990 pp 19-27

2. These are my personal observations of my own responses and those of other colleagues to this situation.

3. J. Lewis 'South African Labour History: A Historiographical Assessment', **Radical History Review**, 46/7, 1990 pp 218-220

4. B. Bozzoli, (ed) 'Popular History and the Witwatersrand' in B. Bozzoli (ed) **Labour, Townships and Protest** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1979) pp 1-15

5. ibid, pp 3-13

6. B. Bozzoli, (ed), **Town and Coutryside in the Transvaal** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983)

7. B. Bozzoli, (ed), **Class, Community and Conflict** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987) , P.L. Bonner, I. Hofmeyr, D. James, and T. Lodge (eds.) **Holding Their Ground** (Witwatersrand University Press and Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1989); P.L. Bonner, P. Delius and D, Posel (eds.) **Apartheid's Genesis** (Witwatersrand University Press and Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1993)

8. For participants in successive conferences see above notes (4) (6) and (7). By the early 1980s all thses disciplines were represented on the History Workshop Committee.

9. B. Bozzoli and P. Delius 'Radical History and South African Society' ; P. la Hausse 'Oral History and South African Historians' **Radical History Review**, 46/7, 1990 pp346-356

10. B. Bozzoli 'Popular History and the Witwatersrand' p.1

11. Triennial Report of the History Workshop, 1 October 1984 - 31 July 1987, pp13-23

12. S. Marks and R. Rathbone (eds.) **Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa** (Longman, London and New York, 1982); S. Marks and S. Trapido (eds.) **The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa** (Longman, London and New York, 1987)

13. 5 contributions out of 14 to **Industrialisation and Social**

Change came from History Workshop associated academics, and 4 out of 14 to the **Race, Class and Nationalism** volume.

14. For a discussion of some of these issues see B. Bozzoli 'Intellectuals, Audiences and Histories: South African Experiences, 1978-1988, **Radical History Review**, 46/7, 1990 pp 237-263

15. L. Callinicos **Gold and Workers** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1981); L. Callinicos **Working Life: Factories, Townships and Popular Culture** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987); L. Callinicos **A Place to Live** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1993)

16. R. Edgar **Because They Chose the Plan of God: The Story of the Bulhoek Massacre** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1988); P. la Hausse **Brewers, Beerhalls and Boycotts, A History of Liquor in South Africa** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1988); J. Wells **We Have Done With Pleading** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1991)

17. L. Witz **Write Your Own History** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1988)

18. B. Bozzoli and M. Friedman **Fight Where We Stand** (History Workshop, Johannesburg, 1988)

19. Luli Callinicos 'Popular History in the Eighties' and L. Witz ' The Write Your Own History Project' **Radical History Review** 46-7, 1990 pp 289-90, pp 377-387

20. See B. Bozzoli, 'Intellectuals, Audiences' and P. Bonner et al **Apartheid's Genesis** pp ix-x

21. B. Freund 'Radical History Writing in the South African Context' **South African Historical Journal**, 24, May 1991

22. ibid; B. Worger 'White Radical History in South Africa' and C. Saunders 'Radical History - the Wits History Workshop Version - Reviewed', **South African Historical Journal**, 24, May 1991, pp 145-153, 160-165

23. Personal Communications

24. A. Grundlingh 'Sociale Geskiedenis en die Dilemma in Afrikanergeskiedskrywing' **South African Historical Journal**, 19, 1987, pp 31-49; K. Smith **The Changing Past** (Southern Book Publishers, Johannesburg, 1988) pp165-6