

T.R.H. Davenport, South Africa: A Modern History, (University of Toronto Press, 1979)

The 1970s have been years of rapid and profound change in Southern Africa. The long anti-colonial wars have been fought to a successful conclusion in Mozambique and Angola, despite formidable imperialist attempt to derail FRELIMO and particularly MPLA. In both of these countries, the fight for national liberation has given way to the struggle for socialist reconstruction. In Namibia and Zimbabwe, the wars of national liberation have reached a crucial phase. The rapid intensification and increasing successes of these struggles have led to desperate attempts by the Western Gang of Five to confine these revolutions within the well-worn constitutional strait-jacket of "majority rule".

In the Republic of South Africa itself; the apparent political quiescence of the middle to late Sixties was progressively shattered as the new decade unfolded. The strike of contract workers in Namibia in late 1971 heralded a massive wave of strikes which shook South African mines and industry in 1972 and 1973. Out of these has emerged a new and militant African trade union movement. The Black Consciousness Movement re-awoke and crystalised the political militancy of the youth, further galvanised by the victorious Mozambican Revolution. Early successes for Vorster's "Detente" policy were wrecked on the defeat of the South African army in Angola, finally shattering any myths about the invincibility of the South African armed forces. And in the worst recession in South African history, the mass uprisings of "Soweto" in June 1976 - taken to new heights by the political general strikes of August and September of that year - terrified the regime into slaughtering hundreds of unarmed children, clearly exposing the extreme repression on which capitalism rests in South Africa. These gathering political storms have produced the first series of armed confrontations within South Africa between the state and the guerrillas of Umkhonto We Sizwe - the military wing of the banned African National Congress.

The ivory towers of academia have not been unshaken by the intensification of these struggles. The past decade witnessed an assault on the prevailing liberal mythology of South African history by a growing band of Marxist scholars.<sup>1</sup> The issues here are relatively clear. On the one hand, the

liberal view explains almost all aspects of social relations in South Africa in terms of a perceived contradiction between narrow, backward racist ideology and the inherently rational and colour-blind imperatives of a capitalist market economy, in which 'the latter is distorted by the former. The Marxist writings on the other hand, argue that it is only possible to analyse the development of the South African social formation through an understanding of the specific imperatives of and struggles generated by, the process of capitalist accumulation in the region. The political conclusions which flow from these different approaches are diametrically opposed to each other.

In this context of intensified mass struggles against the systems of exploitation, and the intense theoretical and ideological struggles these have given rise to, the appearance of a new, single-volume "modern history" of South Africa is a significant event. Davenport makes no modest claims for his book. It is described as a "major history", designed to "fill the void" left by the obsolescence of the existing single-volume histories by Eric Walker and C.W. de Kiewiet. The author is also highly conscious of the struggles within South African historiography, and devotes the final chapter to "the current debate". He is likewise keenly aware that what he terms the "rival interpretations of historians" are no simple disinterested intellectual scuffles, but have direct and significant political consequences (p. xiv). Thus, it is in these terms which the book should be assessed. Does it fill this void? Where does it stand in the current debate? And what are the political implications of the history presented here?

The book cuts a wide swathe through "the whole of South African history, from the late stone age through to 1976". The approach adopted is described as that of "the liberal Africanists". The author seeks neither to predict nor to justify, but to look at the South African past in the light of "tested standards" and so "provide a sound basis of organised factual information" (p. xiv and blurb). These "tested standards" are clearly those of bourgeois empiricism in which the writing of history is a simple cataloguing of supposedly neutral and innocent "facts" by a "neutral" observer - as Davenport describes himself (p. xv).

The resulting text is a narrative of events in which a great deal is described but virtually nothing is explained. We are told (some) of what happened, but left very much in the dark as to why it did so. The purely

descriptive approach persists even into the more self-consciously analytical Section III of the book, on "The Problem of Perspective". The chapter on the crucial issues of "Segregation and Apartheid", e.g., fatuously declares that ever since the 1650s "there have been people who wished the races to live together and people who wished them to live apart" (p. 331). The history of what the author would label "race relations", thus simply involves a description of the different ideas and their implementation in practice. There is a feeble attempt to link the notorious 1913 and 1936 Land Acts to "undesirable squatting" by Africans, but to ask simple question why seems not to have occurred to the author. Why did people have such different and opposing ideas? Why were African squatters regarded as "undesirable", and by which interests? How and why did these different interests arise? These questions are precisely defined out of consideration by the empiricism and idealism of bourgeois historiography. Because all social agents interpret social reality through ideas, a leap is made into the absurd position that ideas (or ideologies, or cultural values) explain social reality. Yet whilst these ideas, ideologies and cultural values are aspects of social behaviour, they are hardly its explanation. Davenport's history, like those it seeks to replace, takes as given precisely that which requires explanation.

Each section of the book suffers from this fundamental flaw. To give but one further example. The very first Chapter deals with the populating of South Africa "from the dawn of history" to the great social eruptions of the Mfecane in the early years of the 19th Century. Here the author is very much concerned with the South African obsession of origins. He rejects the long discredited official myth that white and blacks arrived in what is now South Africa at the same time, but then falls into the trap of taking the official cultural categories as given. Thus such questions are posed as who were the original Sotho speakers, rather than enquiring into how these definitions and categories themselves arose out of a sustained process of social interaction and struggle. Recent research on the cultural categories which have so long been the major tools of South African historiography would indicate that these categories are themselves highly dubious. None other than the leading "official" South African Ethnographer has declared that the major such category, that of "the Nguni" is an entirely arbitrary one.<sup>2</sup> Once again, the author

uncritically accepts as given precisely that which requires explanation.

In the opinion of this reviewer, Davenport's "modern history" in no sense fills the void he sought to occupy. The only advance the book makes over works such as de Kiewiet's A History of South Africa: Social and Economic, is an extension of the temporal perspective, and the inclusion of a few more "facts", particularly relating to the forms of mass resistance to the system of exploitation and oppression. But the author has in no way extended the parameters of South African history beyond the empiricist and idealist limits laid down by de Kiewiet in 1941, and regurgitated without question in the two-volume Oxford History of South Africa, (1969 & 1971). In all important respects, his book is as obsolete as those it seeks to replace. The sad fact remains that there as yet exists no satisfactory general history of South Africa. Though far less ambitious in scope (and itself suffering from a large number of problems), by far the best existing single work on some of the broad themes of South African history is H.J. & R.E. Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950 (1969).

Finally, since the author himself directly raises the question of the political implications of any interpretation of history, it is important to assess those of his own work. In commenting on the varying "solutions" to South Africa's problems put forward by the (white) bourgeois parties, - "political democracy vs. pluralism" (i.e. Apartheid) - the author adopts the classically non-committed pose of the "neutral" academic. However when it comes to the question of mass revolutionary struggles against the exploitative system, this studied neutrality is hastily replaced by a stern injunction against the violent overthrow of the existing system. Such action is deemed undesirable because:

"Revolutions set a premium on power, whereas civilised (?) government demands the taming of power. There are too many lions and foxes in the world and not enough people of compassion" (xv, emphasis added).

Here we have in updated and suitably literary form the ideology by which generations of exploiters have sought to prevent the exploited from throwing off their chains. According to Davenport the problems of South Africa are simply those of a dearth of subjectively "compassionate" people, rather than the objective social relations of exploitation and oppression in their particularly brutal apartheid form, Apartheid, and

the imperialism on which it rests, will not disappear from South Africa simply through the turning of the other cheek and loving one's neighbour - or even less, one's exploiters and oppressors. This is a formula to maintain the existing order of things. By trying to harmonise and reconcile the antagonistic and irreconcilable, Davenport objectively wills the South African people to passivity in the face of exploitation and oppression. For all his subjective dislike of what he terms "an avowedly unjust and violent society", objectively the entire thrust of his book and his approach to history places him squarely on the side of those who, in the final analysis, defend this brutal society. One can only be thankful that the South African masses no longer seem to accept such unctuous advice.

DAN O'MEARA

#### NOTES:

1. A collection of some of the earlier of these Marxist writings will be published in M. Legassick & H. Wolpe (eds), Class, Race and Development in South Africa, (Heinemann, 1979?).
2. N.J. van Warmelo, Preliminary Survey of the Bantu Tribes of Southern Africa, (Pretoria, 1935), part 3 p. 59.

#### UTAFITI NOTES

One of the most striking features of the campus at the beginning of the first term of the 1979/80 academic year was the presence of many more women students than had been the case during previous years. There was a 100% increase in first year women students in 1979/80 compared with 1978/79, a very encouraging development, but as yet unexplained.

Women's issues came to the fore, as well. BRALUP held a workshop on women's studies and development from September 24th to 28th. The participants numbering over 50 (men also) included three categories of people: firstly, those who had done research on any of a number of women's issues; secondly, those who worked directly with women in a service capacity or were instrumental in influencing policy-making with regard to women; and thirdly those who were interested in eliminating the subordination of women who had one of another creative talents or worked in