

BLACK HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS/WHITE HISTORIANS: THE ATTITUDES OF BLACK FIRST-YEAR HISTORY STUDENTS TO SOME OF THE PROBLEMATIC ASPECTS OF SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY*

*Dr M. Roth
Vista University*

South African history has by and large remained the preserve of White historians. This is not a criticism but merely a statement of fact. White culture and ways of thinking have predominated since Theal began writing South African history over a hundred years ago. Since that period we have had various changes in our historiographical outlook. These changes have led to a concentration by historians on certain aspects of our history, to the neglect of others. Works have been used and then replaced by others with different outlooks but by and large the outlines of our history have remained more or less the same. We may not today concentrate as much as we used to on political history but we are now beginning to ask ourselves whether and to what extent the multi-cultural facets of our present-day South African society which we teach are of relevance to students.

The question that I attempted to ask in the questionnaire is what sort of experience is part of the historical consciousness of Black students who have completed secondary education. We know that it is possible to devise a history syllabus that is massively irrelevant to most young people. It all depends on whether the knowledge of history gained gives learners a greater or lesser purchase on the reality that surrounds them. Has the history that our students learnt at secondary school given them a picture of social reality as they know it? Does it encompass areas of knowledge that are essential to the understanding modern South African society.¹

Hartshorne comments that the basic reasons for the inferiority and poor quality of black schooling in South Africa are not to be found in the syllabuses as such. Although these were by no means perfect, they could still be compared to those of other education departments. Their major defect was that they placed Whites, and especially Afrikaners, in a superior light and Blacks in an inferior light.²

Thus to a certain extent the history which our students have been taught at school has reinforced racial misinformation. Teaching to correct for racism must be central to the teaching of history in South Africa. In a multicultural society such as ours you cannot respect a person and his culture and at the same time harbour prejudice against him.³

What I attempted to do in the questionnaire which I set for the students was endeavour to find out what the views of students are in connection with the broad themes that are being discussed at this conference and to what extent these views are coloured by prejudice.

In an earlier study, undertaken three years ago, I looked at the different historical consciousness of the Vista first-, second- and third-year students. One of the significant results obtained from this study was that those students who gave Xhosa as their home language were far more inclined on average to favour a socialistic, at times even Marxist, interpretation of South African history, in contrast to the other language groups.⁴ I was interested, among other aspects, in finding out whether this study would lead to a similar finding.

A questionnaire was constructed which attempted to answer some of these questions. The questionnaire, which consists of 6 biographic variables and 40 history-related items, was given to a sample of 810 history students (see Appendix A).

The biographical variables were sex, age, campus, home language, school qualification and type of student, that is whether the student was a full-time or part-time student. The 40 items had response categories YES, NO and UNSURE.

*Paper read at the biannual conference of the South African Historical Association, Stellenbosch 19-21 January 1994.

For the sample of 810 students, frequency distributions were obtained for all the variables in the questionnaire (see Appendix B for a more detailed exposition of the method used in the statistical analysis).

Because of too small cell frequencies, it was decided to omit the home language categories ENGLISH, AFRIKAANS, TSONGA, VENDA and SWAZI in further analyses. Of the remaining language groups, 15,4% of the students gave ZULU and their home language, 23,6% were XHOSA speakers, 22,5% spoke SOUTHERN SOTHO, 19,9% TSWANA and 12,3% NORTHERN SOTHO.

It was also decided not to use the school qualification variable further because 87,1% of the sample fell into one category namely, Std. 10. This left the other cell frequencies very small. As only 12,9% of the first-year History students did not do History as a Std. 10 subject, we are apparently dealing with students whose views on history were at least partially formed through the education system. The issues dealing with the Voortrekkers, for example, were most likely imbibed in this way. Many of the questions, however, do not deal with history as it is at present taught in these schools, and it is probably true to say that these perceptions were formed elsewhere.

Only first-year students were used for this study. This is because its purpose was to elicit the views of these students before they had any exposure to South African history at tertiary level. The first-year students who formed this sample were mainly in the 20 to 30 year category, that is 69,7% fell into this group. 15% were under 20 and 15,3% were over 30.

The highest number of students came from the Bloemfontein campus, namely 23,7%, while 9,8% came from Welkom. Between these two extremes were the East Rand campus with 14,4%, Soweto with 14,1%, Mamelodi at 15,2%, Port Elizabeth with 12,8% and Sebokeng with 10%. The two weeks in the course of which the questionnaires were answered were ones which saw a number of disruptions on some of the campuses. The result was a lower than expected attendance at lectures and thus a smaller number of questionnaires were answered than had been expected.

Some significant differences were found between full-time and part-time students. The questionnaire was answered by 647 full-time students and 141 part-time students.

Of the 40 questions, 8 were ignored in further analyses because too many respondents fell into one category. These were Q2 (96,6% responded NO), Q19 (94,6% responded YES), Q24 (92,8% responded YES), Q26 (85,9% responded YES), Q30 (83,4% responded YES),

Q33 (88,4% responded YES) and Q34 (89,7% responded YES). The implications of these responses will be discussed below.

The results were analysed through the use of factor analysis. The results of this factor analysis will be discussed individually, as will some of the questions from which the factors were compiled. The factors were constructed as follows:

Mfecane: Illusion of reality?

This factor consisted of Questions 3, 18, 23, 27, and 28. There were no significantly different results obtained from an analysis of this factor but some results may be deduced from the answers to the individual questions.

The Mfecane was a story put about by Whites in order to legitimize the occupation of Black land.

42,3% YES
29,2% NO
28,5% UNSURE

Without the deserted lands in Natal, caused by Shaka during the Mfecane, the Voortrekkers would not have managed to settle there.

42,2% YES
22,7% NO
30,1% UNSURE

It was not the Mfecane but the meddling of Whites which led to fighting between the Black people of South Africa

53% YES
17,1% NO
29,9% UNSURE

The three questions above are all marked by a strong element of uncertainty. Nearly a third of those who answered, namely 29,5%, replied that they were unsure. This factor had more uncertainty attached to it than any other and appears to indicate that the respondents do not have a strong historical consciousness regarding the Mfecane, thus adding to its air of illusion rather than strengthening its reality. The first question, of course, asks directly whether or not the Mfecane was an illusion and 70,8% held that it was or they were uncertain.

If Shaka had not been assassinated, the might of the Zulu nation would have withstood the onslaught of the Whites.

50,5% YES
18,2% NO
31,3% UNSURE

Shaka was not an important figure in our history.

15,1% YES
78,6% NO
6,3% UNSURE

The answers to both these questions attest to the importance attached by the respondents to Shaka as a figure of some considerable stature.

It is only by understanding the glorious past of the Zulu nation that we can understand the politics of present-day Natal.

45,9% YES
34,1% NO
20% UNSURE

The majority of the respondents agreed with this contention. The large number of UNSURE answers again indicates that this is a subject about which respondents at first-year level appear to have little or no knowledge.

We might thus tentatively conclude that as far as the factor analysis on the Mfecane is concerned, about one third of the Vista first-year History students are unclear as to its particular arguments or even (it appears) some of the facts it entails. The position of Shaka as an important national figure, however, appears to be well recognised but the rest of the historical scenario associated with him appears to be uncertain. It does not seem to be a clear part of the respondents' historical consciousness.

Teaching apartheid: Developing a rational approach

The questions which made up this factor were 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14, 16, 21, 29, 35, 37 and 40.

Significant differences were found (on the 5% level of significance) in the case of males and females. They differed significantly in their responses, males obtaining higher average scores than females. A possible explanation is that the males perhaps perceived themselves as more disadvantaged by apartheid than was the perception amongst females. It could perhaps

be that males saw apartheid as the most important variable in preventing their upward mobility in society while for females, who have gender discrimination to contend with as well, it may just have been perceived as one factor amongst others.

Apartheid was a method of White domination.

94,6% YES

The use of Apartheid helped the Afrikaners to remain in power.

92,8% YES

The answers to the above two questions might be of some help in developing a rational approach to apartheid. That apartheid was a method to achieve and retain power for the Whites and particularly for the Afrikaner appears to be an overwhelmingly accepted perception amongst our students. This could be useful as an indication of a possible approach to aspects of our 20th-century history.

Apartheid is to blame for our economic difficulties.

85,9% YES

The answer to this question can be viewed as rather daunting for those who hope to form a government after the April elections. If nearly 86% of first-year History students believe that our economic difficulties are due to apartheid, then when apartheid disappears, which must be after April, then *ipso facto* our economic difficulties should disappear as well! It is really not necessary to comment further on this viewpoint except perhaps to state that any future syllabus we put into operation should concentrate to a greater extent than it does at present on South African economics.

All our problems are due to racial discrimination.

89,7% YES

The resounding YES which this question evoked appears to indicate that the fact that there may be other problematic aspects of our society will be accepted unwillingly.

When this answer is taken in conjunction with the one above then the prognosis for our new government is even more bleak. If all our problems are due to racial discrimination and if apartheid is viewed as the expression of that discrimination then all our problems

will be expected to disappear when racial discrimination is outlawed in South Africa.

The segregationist policies as practised by Hertzog and Smuts before 1948 were not the same as the apartheid of Malan and Verwoerd after 1948.

39,4% YES
38,4% NO
22,2% UNSURE

There appears to be a large measure of dissent and uncertainty to the answer to this question. Although the majority said yes by 1%, either their schooling or their own perceptions had not made a clear demarcation between the pre- and post-1948 periods.

It was sanctions that caused the failure of apartheid.

49,1% YES
37,2% NO
13,7% UNSURE

Nearly 50% of the respondents held this view, although a sizeable section did not agree. So one might say that the part played by sanctions in the failure of apartheid is an aspect to debate.

The failure of socialism in Eastern Europe led to the failure of apartheid in South Africa.

15,4% YES
56,8% NO
27,8% UNSURE

Although over half the respondents answered NO to this question it too had a large UNSURE component. It appears that the respondents saw little or no connection between the fall of totalitarian governments in Europe and in South Africa.

The following three questions dealt with the possibility that apartheid was in some way beneficial to Black society.

Some Blacks benefited from apartheid.

46,3% YES
46,5% NO
7,2% UNSURE

Apartheid led to many Blacks finding jobs in the Homelands.

28,5% YES
65,4% NO
6,1% UNSURE

Apartheid was of no benefit to Blacks.

80,6% YES
16,1% NO
3,3% UNSURE

The answers to these three questions appear at first glance to make no sense. To the first question, that some Blacks benefited from apartheid, 46,3% of the respondents answered yes, however only 28,5 agreed that apartheid led to many Blacks finding jobs in the Homelands while when given the direct statement, namely that apartheid was of no benefit to Blacks, an overwhelming 80,6% agreed.

It appears that respondents hold the view that apartheid was of no benefit to Blacks overall. However, there appears to be some measure of support for the statement that some Blacks did benefit from its creation. In whatever way this aspect is tackled in a future curriculum, the question of who benefited and to what extent would need further investigation. It is obvious that the respondents are in need of further illumination on the subject.

Apartheid is unique, there has never been another system like it in world history.

49,6% YES
37,5% NO
13% UNSURE

This is an important result. To approach the teaching of apartheid in a rational manner should entail placing it in its historical context and also in the broader framework of other repressive regimes throughout history. This will be a difficult task if students believe in its uniqueness.

The historiographical debate on the industrialization of South Africa.

The questions comprising this factor were: Q4, Q21, Q25, Q36, Q39 and Q40.

The sex of the respondents in factor 3 was an important variable, influencing the answers to this factor. Males on average scored higher in this factor than females, that is they disagreed with the contention put forward in this factor, which was that there was a connection between apartheid, capitalism and industrialization.

Other variables for which significant results were obtained for this factor were those of sex, campus and home language.

The campus of the respondents was an important variable for factor 3. Mamelodi and Sebokeng disagreed the most with this contention, Port Elizabeth agreed the most.

Home language is also related to the responses in factor 3. Those who gave Xhosa as their home language were most in agreement (to a significance of $p < 0.0001$). It is obvious that biographical variables strongly influenced this factor. Northern Sotho and Southern Sotho agreed the least.

Thus the Xhosa, who predominate on the Part Elizabeth campus (50% of the Port Elizabeth respondents gave Xhosa as their home language), agreed that apartheid was the result of capitalism and industrialization.

We would not have had apartheid if South Africa had not entered the industrial age.

24% YES
46,1% NO
29,8% UNSURE

The connection between apartheid and the industrial age was not apparent to 29,8% of the respondents; 46,1% disagreed. Thus a relatively small proportion agreed with the statement, namely 24%.

Capitalism led to apartheid.

72% YES
15,7% NO
12,3% UNSURE

There is thus a very definite belief linking capitalism to apartheid and all those contemplating a syllabus which does not accord with this view will have their work cut out for them. It is noteworthy that although there was a large measure of uncertainty concerning industrialization and its connection with apartheid, there was far less uncertainty when the question of linking capitalism and apartheid arose.

Trade unions are beneficial to the economy as a whole.

68% YES
15,9% NO
16,1% UNSURE

In South Africa, trade unions are not only economic, but also political organisations.

77,3% YES
12,5% NO
10,2% UNSURE

The answers to these two questions emphasise the importance which the respondents attach to the question of trade unions and the role they have played in South African history. The agreement on the role played by trade unions in South African policies makes them an important part of any future history syllabus.

The history of Black politics in South Africa, 1910 to 1962: a historiographical balance sheet.

Questions Q20, Q25, Q31 made up a factor analysis which provided some insight into the Marxist and/or socialist thinking of our students.

For this factor those who gave their home language as Xhosa obtained the lowest score. This was a highly significant result ($p < 0,0001$), and can be put in a separate group. This accords with the other results obtained from the earlier questionnaire and emphasises the socialistic thinking of the Xhosa-speaking respondents.

The answers to the individual questions were as follows:

It is just as important to learn about Joe Slovo as it is to learn about Govan Mbeki.

80,9% YES
11,4% NO
7,8% UNSURE

The results to this question can perhaps be regarded as noteworthy in that no racial bias is evident. Black students did not think that it was less important to learn about Joe Slovo, a White communist, than it was to learn about Govan Mbeki, a Black communist.

Class differences play an important part in South African history.

61,2% YES
27,8% NO
11% UNSURE

The liberal historiographical view that we should look at race rather than class when analysing South African history is not supported by 61,2% of our respondents.

Socialist and Marxist principles are still important in South Africa.

62,4% YES
18,2% NO
19,4% UNSURE

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe does not mean that Communism does not work.

61,5% YES
11,7% NO
26,8% UNSURE

Both these questions were answered in the affirmative by over 60% of the respondents and appear to suggest a relatively high level of support for Marxist ideas.

Marxism is in favour of economics, therefore economically Marxism would benefit South Africa.

53,3% YES
19,6% NO
27,1% UNSURE

This question may at first sight appear rather puzzling in that it does not appear to make any rational sense and the question must thus be asked why it was included in the questionnaire. It was included because the students themselves put forward this premise in the course of a lecture. The amount of support it received led to its being included in the questionnaire. This very simplistic belief, if at all widespread, would make it imperative for any future syllabus to include a sound exposition of Marxism and its connection with economics.

The ANC is the most important Black organisation in South African history and should be given more prominence than any other Black organisations.

68% YES
27,8% NO
4,2% UNSURE

Too much credit is given to the ANC for the fall of Apartheid.

58,3% YES
28,9% NO
12,9% UNSURE

Taking the answer to this question in conjunction with that immediately above it, it appears that although the students think that the ANC is the most important Black organisation in this country, they do not overestimate its role in the fall of apartheid.

Without the PAC the liberation of the Black people of South Africa would have failed.

31,8% YES
48,8% NO
19,4% UNSURE

Without Inkatha the liberation of the Black people of South Africa would have failed.

92,6% of the respondents said NO.

The ANC-Communist Party alliance was essential for Black liberation.

82,4% said YES.

These results seem to show that neither the ANC nor the PAC are credited with sole responsibility for Black liberation. Inkatha appears to receive hardly any credit at all. There seems no doubt amongst the respondents, however, of the crucial role played by the ANC-Communist Party alliance in Black liberation. This is an aspect that could perhaps be highlighted in any future syllabus.

Black and White history must be combined in order for us to truly understand the history of South Africa.

88,4% YES
8,8% NO
2,8% UNSURE

This question received overwhelming support and comes as quite a relief. What on earth would South African historians do with all that research they had done on Hertzog, Smuts and all the rest of our White politicians if it turned out that black students hold White history to be of no relevance to them! The question was asked in order to ascertain how Afro-centric the students were about their own history.

A factor containing questions Q10, Q15, Q20, Q21, Q25, Q29, Q31, Q35, Q36, Q38, Q39, Q40 dealt with the students' support of communist viewpoints and of those groups in South African history who appear to have supported such views, namely the South African Communist Party and the ANC. Those who received the lowest scores for this factor were the most in favour of it.

The respondents who gave Xhosa as their home language differed significantly ($p < 0,0001$) in their answers to the others, being the most in agreement. Port Elizabeth campus has the largest number of Xhosa students and was significantly different to the other campuses, its respondents agreeing the most with the factor.

Part-time and full-time students gave different responses with the part-time students, on average being least in agreement while the full-time students agreed the most. This means that the full-time students appeared to support such views far more than the part-time first-year students. The part-time students are mostly teachers and in an older age group than the full-time students. Half of the part-time but only about 13% of the full-time students were over 30.

Various interpretations on the nature and meaning of the Great Trek.

This factor consisted of Questions 1, 3, 8, 12, 17, 18, 22, 27, 28, 32, 37. The majority of these questions asked the respondents to comment on a rather negative image of the Great Trek and the Afrikaners. As will be noted, there was general agreement with this image, but agreement on the importance or otherwise of the Great Trek and its place in South African history was less unanimous. The last question for which the students views are given below, namely that which attributes the discovery of minerals in South Africa to the opening of the interior by the Voortrekkers, was added in order to see whether the respondents were prepared to concede any advantages to the opening of the interior to White settlement.

The Great Trek is not an important event in South African history.

36,7% YES
52,1% NO
11,3% UNSURE

Too much time in the history classes at school is spent on the Great Trek.

35,8% YES
50% NO
14,2% UNSURE

Political beliefs of the Afrikaner are rooted in the Voortrekkers' denial of rights to others.

75% YES
7% NO
17,9% UNSURE

It was the Great Trek which dispersed Afrikaners and their ideas throughout South Africa that led to apartheid.

63,6% YES
13,2% NO
23,2% UNSURE

This is an important result because it implies a direct link in the perceptions of the respondents between the Voortrekkers and denial of rights to Blacks in our day.

The Great Trek was about a few White settlers who occupied Black land in the interior of South Africa.

72% YES
15,7% NO
12,3% UNSURE

Without the Great Trek all the land in the interior of South Africa would have remained in Black hands.

68,5% YES
13,9% NO
17,6% UNSURE

It was due to the Voortrekkers who opened the interior to White settlement that gold and diamonds were discovered in South Africa.

49,7% YES
26,6% NO
23,8% UNSURE

For factor 8 there was a significant difference in the way the campuses scored. Those that had the highest score were those who thought the Voortrekkers were an important part of South African history. There was a significant difference between Mamelodi, which had the highest average, in contrast to Welkom, Sebokeng, the East Rand and Port Elizabeth, which had the lowest mean for this factor. Thus Mamelodi thought the

Voortrekkers to have been of greater importance in South African history, than did the other campuses. Port Elizabeth did not give much credibility to the Voortrekkers and did not view them as of great importance. Again this accords with previous findings in which the Xhosa students of this campus did not consider the Voortrekkers of great significance.

In conclusion, it appears that the views of the respondents in connection with the themes looked at in this study were as follows:

Concerning the Mfecane, the respondents accorded a great deal of importance to Shaka but their grasp of the Mfecane appears to be uncertain and we are left with the picture that to them at least the Mfecane appears to be more myth than reality.

On the question of the Great Trek, the consensus of opinion can tentatively be described as one that gives the Great Trek an important place in South African historiography but at the same time it will have to be taught with some sensitivity as it was regarded by and large in a negative light by the students. Different campuses held differing views of the importance of the Voortrekkers, those in Port Elizabeth regarding them as

of less importance than those respondents who came from the Mamelodi campus. This result is similar to the one in the initial study. It may be that this type of result should be taken into consideration and that a different emphasis may be given in different regions to the importance attached to the Great Trek.

The section on Black historiography and also that on capitalism, apartheid and industrialization emphasise the importance which the respondents attach to the role which they perceive communism to have played in 20th-century South African history. In the case of Black historiography this can be broadened to include the role that the Communist Party played in Black liberation. There is also a great deal of acceptance of Marxism and Marxist views in general.

The previous study, which used a sample of first-, second- and third-year students, found that the students who gave Xhosa as their home language and that campuses which had the most Xhosa speakers were significantly different on average in their views on socialist and specifically communist aspects of South African history. Their acceptance of such views separated them from other language groups.⁵ This was found to be the case in this study as well.

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5. M. Roth, "Zulu and Xhosa - A significant Historical Consciousness? ...", p. 3.

APPENDIX A

YES NO UNSURE

		YES	NO	UNSURE
17	Too much time in history classes at school is spent on the Great Trek.			
18	If Shaka had not been assassinated, the might of the Zulu nation would have withstood the onslaught of the Whites.			
19	Apartheid was a method of White domination.			
20	Socialist and Marxist principles are still important in South Africa.			
21	Capitalism led to Apartheid.			
22	The Great Trek is about a few White settlers who occupied Black land in the interior of South Africa.			
23	Shaka was not an important figure in our history.			
24	The use of Apartheid helped the Afrikaners to remain in power.			
25	Class differences have played an important role in South African history.			
26	Apartheid is to be blamed for our economic difficulties.			
27	Without the Great Trek all the land in the interior of South Africa would have remained in Black hands.			
28	It was not the Mfecane but the meddling of Whites which led to fighting between the Black people of South Africa.			
29	Apartheid is unique, there has never been another system like it in world history.			
30	The ANC-Communist Party alliance was essential for Black liberation.			
31	Marxism is in favour of economics, therefore economically Marxism would benefit South Africa.			
32	It was due to the Voortrekkers who opened the interior to White settlement that gold and diamonds were discovered in South Africa.			
33	Black and White history must be combined in order for us to truly understand the history of South Africa.			
34	All our problems are due to racial discrimination.			
35	Too much credit is given to the ANC for the fall of Apartheid.			
36	Trade unions are beneficial to the economy as a whole.			
37	It was the Great Trek which dispersed Afrikaners and their ideas throughout South Africa that led to Apartheid.			
38	Without the PAC the liberation of the Black people of South Africa would have failed.			
39	In South Africa, trade unions are not only economic, but also political organisations.			
40	Apartheid arose as a result of the rise of industry and the mines.			