

THE PEN AND THE SWORD : SEEKING A NEW FOCUS ON HISTORY AND THE CHANGING OF HISTORY IN SOUTH AFRICA. ⁽¹⁾

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About twenty years ago, there was a decline in interest in history and history teaching in this country. The number of pupils offering history as a high school subject dropped, and the quality of work produced by them also led to concern. Today, there seems to be a renaissance in regard to the subject. I cannot pass judgement on either quantity or quality yet, but on all sides there seems to be a renewed interest.

Largely, this seems to be connected with the political developments of our times, and one notes that often the same people or organisations which contented themselves with decrying history teaching, are now calling for more history in schools, colleges and universities. But the call is for a "new" history, for a revitalised, re-orientated and re-written history that they seek. People at many levels and in many areas realise that one cannot do without history, but they are now saying that whereas history formerly served—and presently still serves—the ends of one class of South Africans, it must now be used to serve another.

The shift is from history serving the needs of the White section, to the needs of all; from the needs of the rich capitalists, to the needs of workers; from being the tool of the oppressor, to the instrument of the oppressed; from the service of those who would maintain the *status quo*, to the service of those who seek change.

Essentially, then, the focus is not on a new history, a new syllabus or a new methodology, but on a new South African society.

It would seem that teachers of history in this country have to ask themselves the following questions:

- do we believe that history should in any way serve to orientate the pupils to the future?
- do we see it as our role to teach history in such a manner as to promote social change?
- could the above questions be answered in the affirmative without changing the fabric of South African society so radically that the interests of its people generally will suffer?
- is it possible to teach such a new history without other changes in the school system as well?
- what possible chance of success is there for the changes envisaged to be brought about?

I do not propose to supply answers to all the questions. Indeed, it is noticeable that it is far easier to ask questions like these, rather than to answer them. But before addressing them at all, it is well to acknowledge that not all teachers of history would accept the validity of the questions. Yet, the very fact that some—indeed, many—will take issue with the questions, is not without significance. It would reflect the fact that many of our teachers of history have not yet been brought face to face with such questions, or with the social conditions from which they spring. It is not the purpose of this paper to pass a negative judgment on these teachers, but to present them with a point of view different from that to which they are accustomed, and to request them to evaluate the supporting arguments. It is not in the spirit of the questions, nor of this Conference, to try and impose points of view on teachers, but rather to create a climate for inquiry and search.

Do we regard history teaching as a means of orienting students to the future? Unless we believe in "history for history's sake" or in "education for education's sake", the answer can only be in the affirmative. As all education is—or should be—intended to enable people to bring about a better future, so history teaching is also intended to enable students to un-

derstand the past in order to be able to plan, operate in or enjoy a better future.

Modern social science claims to be orientated to the future, and that its skills should be directed to the creation of a future. In the development of these skills, it becomes essential to delve into the past, i.e. into the history of the science, but again only to gain better understanding of the present in order to plan the future more surely.

Thus Wendell Bell says of Auguste Comte, the father of Sociology and others of his school, that "... (they) unveiled the future, and tried to give it direction. For them, the past was prologue, the present a burden. They longed for the future." ⁽²⁾

Bell also names the sociologist Charles de Saint-Pierre as "... apparently having been the first (in 1737) to suggest that man's future lies in his own hands." ⁽³⁾

Here we get a good synthesis of the relationship past and future. If we get too wedded to "the facts of history", i.e. with past events as if they are absolutes, forgetting that none of us knows *all* of the circumstances surrounding these past events, we fall prey to the theory that history is bound to repeat itself. This could lead to a past event being elevated to a future certainty, again forgetting that circumstances change in a myriad of ways.

We then develop what Bell calls "... narrow positivism—an epistemology designed to deal with facts. Facts are by definition, phenomena of the past. There are no future facts. Thus, the logic of determinism invites the backward look, and the past comes to pervade the classroom and the research centre. By contrast, the forward look has an openness not easily handled within a thought system constructed to deal with events that have already happened." ⁽⁴⁾

It is possible that the industrial revolution and the ascendancy of the normative sciences and mathematics may be responsible for the emphasis given to "facts" in our time. Yet it would also be necessary to temper this by reminding ourselves that no normative scientist or mathematician regards his "facts" as absolute, but always works on the hypothesis that the basic facts which his system presupposes, are subject to change.

Applying this argument to a local social-political situation, we have the oft-repeated warning that we must not be too ready to extend "democracy" to Blacks, as this has been "proved" to have "failed" in so many past instances in Africa. Now, all of these concepts, *democracy*, *proof* and *failure* are subject to so many interpretations that it is quite bewildering, and one wonders if any valid conclusions may be drawn at all. Do we not in the end, then, draw those conclusions which suit us, and then proceed to rationalise our actions? The argument developed here is not intended to denigrate the importance of a knowledge of historical events; only to warn against the danger of developing a philosophic outlook, and therefore a teaching style, which is backward-looking when our attention should be directed more toward the future.

In the preceding portion of this paper we have given thought to the idea that history teaching could be directed to the future, indeed it is argued that it should do so. In a sense we may, then, have addressed the next question: should the history teacher teach his subject in such a manner as to promote social change? The difference which this question poses is to make it much more personal. It is one thing to recognise—even to accept—a certain philosophic position,

but another to see oneself as an active agent in practising that philosophy. It is often easier, and more comfortable, to conform to established practice.

One would wish, however, to believe that the conscientious teacher of history who does, indeed, believe that history teaching should be directed at the future, would also desire to be actively engaged in the process. This decision should be carefully and conscientiously taken. Qualitatively, it is not the same as "being part of the liberatory struggle". To be sure, the history teacher who decides to further the liberatory struggle may also elect, as a history teacher, to teach so as to promote social change. The distinction is that, as a part of the liberatory struggle he is not necessarily a reasoning, rational, scientific educator, whilst as a teacher opting for social change he is all of these.

The teacher who aims at social change regards his interaction with his students as occasions on which he challenges their thinking in such ways as to arouse in them a sensitivity to social issues, ideas and values. These ideas and values are embedded in a cultural system, but cultural systems are not static, nor are they transcendental, ethereal and disembodied. McDaniel lays stress on the active personal, institutional and technological elements of such a system when he says "A cultural system is composed of people acting as individuals and interacting with groups or organizations, with things in a given place, subject to values and ideas that are affected by and affect behaviour, and are transmitted by a symbol system and its attendant technology" ⁽⁵⁾ (emphasis in original).

McDaniel's description of seven change factors affecting cultural systems is appended as Appendix A, not because it is regarded as inviolable, but because it does illustrate some of the detail involved in dealing with culture systems. It also shows at how many points and in how many dimensions a culture system is valuable, and therefore how flexible and changeable it is. This is different from the concept of rigidity and changelessness—almost divinely ordained—which we so often get from those who see history as "the passing on of our culture", where people, institutions, laws, legal systems and history teaching are seen as a kind of *deus ex machina* to protect a specific culture from change.

If, against the background of the above comments on history and change, we look to the South African scene, we will come up against some very pressing questions. First, it should be noted that the above comments, and views on change and futurism as quoted from Toffler's book, were in no way specifically related to, or directed at the South African situation. This makes it more interesting, when speaking of history teaching in South Africa, to note that what is happening in South Africa is not a uniquely South African phenomenon; on the contrary, it is part of a much wider view of the subject. It is not even necessarily related to or cognisant of more revolutionary views of education, such as those of Paulo Freire. If similarities are noticed, the relationship may be other than casual or direct.

But the views of history teaching discussed above will undoubtedly ring bells—even alarm bells!—in South Africa. I would go so far as to say that in certain educational circles, notably among Blacks (and this includes Coloured and Indian), the view would be expressed that the opinions of White South Africans are "irrelevant". It would be held, then, that Whites would obviously keep to the traditional, conservative, past-oriented, backward-looking type of history. This would suit Whites, as it would perpetuate values such as White superiority and would support institutions such as present governmental and judicial systems which are beneficial to Whites.

But in writing this paper, I am mindful that most of those who will hear or read it, will be White teachers of history. And I cannot accept that there is any health in an approach which summarily turns it back on a section of the South African peo-

ple. Partly, because they, too, are South Africans and if we profess to work for a non-racial country, we should not take a decision on a racial basis. Partly, also, because White teachers of history are very close to the present power structure. If, therefore, they could be convinced that a new approach to history teaching is necessary, they could be valuable allies to those who seek to bring about change.

So the question whether a new type of history teaching can be implemented without harming the total fabric of South African society so radically that the interests of South Africans generally will suffer, becomes relevant.

Of course, we shall always debate the question of what constitutes harm, but we should surely have general agreement on what constitutes the people of South Africa. Differences will probably be politically based, such as in what political context do we see the people(s) of South Africa. Is it a context of partition, or of federalism, or of cantons or of a unitary state? Is it a social context of group areas, of laissez faire freedom, or of forced integration? Is it an economic context of a free market with freedom of association, or is it to be a more rigid type of socialistic control? These are but some of the vexed issues, the resolution of which is not strictly the business of the history teacher, but the awareness of which is very much his business.

So I see it as inevitable that many teachers of history will feel exceedingly uncomfortable when asked to consider these new approaches. They will ask themselves questions such as: Is it really history? Isn't it too revolutionary? Is it part of some sinister plot or total onslaught on "the system" or on Whites? Is it defensible? Isn't it just propaganda? Who is behind it? Where will it all end? What about our jobs?

They will tend to say that they were taught by the old methods and according to the old values, and what is wrong with that? After all, they have always got good results, good inspectors' reports, and their pupils and students have gone on to achieve good academic results, on the basis of which they have secured good jobs—why depart from a proven path?

Alas, it will not be possible to convince all. Undoubtedly there are those who have digested the old history, taught to them by the old methods, and who have benefited thereby. This is not at issue. What is at issue is whether the country can afford to continue to perpetuate a practice which is palpably out of harmony with the times. To say this is not to invite every teacher of history to dump all of his old ideas and skills and to become a bannerwaving demagogue. On the contrary, it would be far more appropriate and valuable if they were to become that much more serious, showing a scholarly readiness to examine the issues with the greatest possible degree of objectivity. We need our teachers and especially our teachers of history, to be rational, analytic, scholarly and balanced. The pen is still mightier than the sword.

The question of harm to the fabric of South African society is, then, relative. One would have to accept differences—even vast differences—of opinion. But intellectual honesty remains a value that should be striven after. And from time to time people, teachers, educators and leaders see visions. Such visions were seen by the Afrikaners, when they were humiliated by the English after the Boer War. Thus the Afrikaans poet-dramatist N.P. van Wyk Louw lets one of his characters, the Afrikaner, Pieter, say that he sees "... a new sort of Afrikaner. Not justy the uncouth Boer as we say ... I felt: here the Afrikaner acquired wisdom, and intellect, equal to or better than the best of the English, cultured; superior to their Milners and others." ⁽⁶⁾

A nation does not strive for power merely for the sake of power. It must be inspired by the belief that it, as a people, is indeed worthy and capable. Herein resides its drive and its sense of destiny, which spurs it on to mobilise people, ideas and institutions to serve its quest for power.

And White South Africans who observe these strivings in Blacks today, must recognise the signals as others do what they did, because they felt as they felt. And where the Afrikaners of the early 20th century revolted against the perceived injustice of Lord Milner and the British, so they should understand the feelings of the Blacks today. Again, it was N.P. van Wyk Louw who said: "If you enslave a proud people, it becomes their right to revolt against the law".⁽⁷⁾

In short, teachers who have misgivings about the new directions and approaches in history teaching, should at the least respect their own intellectual integrity by considering it fairly.

We turn now to the question whether the new history teaching is possible without changing the school system as well? The short answer is: No. But to say this is not to say anything shockingly new. For any school system is subject to change, and the South African school and state authorities are constantly declaring—at least in words—their openness to improve the system. The de Lange Committee's work and its terms of reference, from the government and through the Human Sciences Research Council, is evidence of this. Of course, the implementation of change in education is always a slow process, as there are not only vested interests at stake, but the new ideas have to contend with deeply-entrenched attitudes and prejudices.

As Inspector of Education in the Coloured school system years ago (about 1970) I often spoke to groups of teachers about objectivity and truthfulness in history teaching. A favourite topic was the Battle of Blood River. The history books, and popular belief, said that victory was given to the Boers. I would ask teachers to re-consider this, given that there were 464 Boers inside the trekkers' lager, and 460 Non-whites, active fighters in the battle. This would cause some confusion. Teachers would ask for my sources and authorities. When given, they would reply that it is not so stated in their books, and they feel that the book is to be followed. But what of the truth? I would ask. But what would the Department say? they would reply. I would then reply that in their circuit I was the departmental representative, and the discussion would usually end with their submission that inspectors change, and the next inspector's views might not be the same!

So there are vested interests. The department needs to perpetuate a certain view, and the teachers need to safeguard their jobs. (Some years ago I spoke on a similar topic at the University of South Africa; I told the same story as above, and its relevance was emphasised by the fact that the previous evening, Prof Floors van Jaarsveld of the University of Pretoria had from the rostrum, queried the existence of the "sacred" Covenant to commemorate the Battle of Blood River, and had been tarred and feathered by a band of right-wing Afrikaners).

Of course the system will have to change. But it is still true that the longest journey starts with a single step. This is not the place, and we certainly do not have the time, to examine all the faults of the educational system of South Africa. But neither is it our purpose as teachers of history to set about this task. We should rather, whilst being aware of many wrongs, try to do right within our area, viz. the teaching of history and perhaps this can be done by other means than just subject content, as we shall presently try to show.

We have also raised the question of the possibility of success with a new approach to history teaching. As with so many other matters, no firm reply is possible. We may indulge in crystal-gazing, or in back-slapping or in other forms of euphoria; probably our best bet lies in sheer hard work, for which no real substitute has ever been found.

Since the 1980's, there has been an increasing amount of application to the promotion of people's history, as part of people's education and in pursuit of people's power. Clearly, the main focus for this has been in those areas which have been furthest removed from power, i.e. the Blacks. Finding themselves also bereft of real power, Coloured people and Asians

have joined these ranks and, since the mid-1970's, have used the term Blacks to include all Non-white groups. This usage is more especially found among the younger people.

Several groups have emerged in different parts of the country to examine the idea of people's history. Study groups have been set up, some more structural than others, and with varying resources as of money, leadership and scholastic skills.

The movement is clearly and purposefully political. It aims at doing precisely what it claims others have done in this country, viz. to employ the forces of education—and in this case, of history teaching—to serve the cause of political liberation.

All manner of opportunities were used to propagate the new approach. The school and university boycotts, for instance, were not simply stay-aways from class; the interruption of normal class activities was used to hold meetings, invite speakers, to conduct seminars and workshops, and to promote an awareness of shortcomings of the education system so as to lay a basis for a new thinking, value-system and procedure.

Perhaps the process can best be illustrated by what has happened and is happening at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). This University, started as an institution to promote apartheid in higher education, reversed this direction and adopted the philosophy of furthering the interests of the working class or the underprivileged.

In about 1985 its history department seriously addressed the emerging issues as well as the demands of its students for active recognition of the new philosophy of the university as well as the mounting community pressure for change. One of the phenomena to emerge was a programme called the People's History Project.

This Project seeks to make the history taught at UWC more relevant to the students, to democratise the teaching/learning methods, and to build up a reservoir of primary material and new alternative sources.

As yet, the basic history courses and curricula do not appear to have been altered much; the People's History Project is but one facet of the total course, and replaces the "papers" or "seminars" formally prepared and for which marks were awarded, these marks being taken into account in determining the students' final course marks.

Now, instead of the topics for the seminars being decided by the lecturers, the students have a share in making the decision. First, it should be pointed out that the classes are divided into some 50 or 60 groups under the supervision of student assistants, these being senior students of history. These, in turn, are supervised by staff members. Regular "workshops" for student assistants and lecturers help to ensure the maintenance of acceptable standards.

Students then decide on their topics, subject to these controls. As may be expected, the topics tend to be rather contemporary, as the students, fired by current events, wish to get to grips with the present. Examples of topics chosen this year are: the history of the UWC, history of sport organisations, the Paarl 300 celebrations, biographies of present-day personalities, and movements such as COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions). Each group present a "report", which must consist of at least 4 pages multiplied by the number of students in the group. In this way students are obliged to make their contribution.

By their involvement, students are motivated to become familiar with the techniques of historical research. The process is more important than the product at this stage. The process is not only one of learning elementary scholastic skills, but also of extending democracy into the classroom. So often one hears the criticism that South African students are competent at reproducing memorised material, but unable to think independently. Any South African who has been through our

system will be aware of this accusation, and of the strong temptation of each new generation of teachers, at whatever level, to perpetuate the teaching method with which he is familiar, although he may be critical of it.

Whilst the People's History Project at UWC is still in its infancy, faculty members report great enthusiasm on the part of students, a condition which was not so apparent before. Undoubtedly, the material produced will be of uneven quality, but the real value will lie in the process of inquiry, reading and book-research, interviewing, discussion, writing-up in an approved manner, and in the pride which accompanies the production of any such work.

Hopefully, too, the lessons learnt during work on the Project will be projected into the more traditional coursework. And it is also more than likely that the student who starts off with an attitude of rejecting all previously-written history, will come to exercise a more balanced judgement once he has tried his own hand at history writing. Hopefully, too, many a student will come to appreciate that there is more to history and to social change than slogans.

A project or method such as the one described may also lead to the production of more source material, available in published form, or as notes, or tapes, or as matter for discussion. In this way, a greater consciousness of history could develop. A greater pool of source material must inevitably lead to a change in the school history books, and so into the school syllabi.

Gradually—or not so gradually—changes will surely come about. At present, most of the published material takes a very definite line which highlights, e.g. labour movements and developments in such a way as to denounce capitalism, yet time and more inquiry and writing could provide perspective and balance. One thing is certain, the new writing must come less from the privileged and more from the underprivileged themselves. And, insofar as we cannot exclude the privileged (for scholarship is traditionally a middle-class pursuit), those who write will have to be aware of and sensitive to the conditions of the workers.

To sum up, then, one should be pleased there seems to be a resurgence of interest in history, and a new appreciation of the importance of history in helping people, especially the youth, to form ideas and values on which to model future society. Teachers of history should, I believe, be a part of this process, indeed, they should play a central and vital role in it.

A special word of advice is given to those who teach in schools for white pupils. They are urged to apply their minds very keenly to these matters, and not to regard them as something taking place "over there" in other schools. This would be both indefensible, because the ideas warrant consideration in their own right, irrespective of the South African situation, and irresponsible, because the future of the country and of the very pupils or teachers whom they teach, is at stake. It is in order to give some further direction to your undoubted spirit of responsibility, that I wish you well in this conference and for the future.

See p. 31 for Appendix A.

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APPENDIX A

Seven change factors

1. Demographic

We presume that in any culture increases or decreases in population, or shifts in the age and sex distribution, generate other changes. We would include under this variations in birth and death rates, life span, family size, balance of young vs. old, migrations, etc.

2. Technological Innovation

We assert that changes in technology trigger other changes. We define technology here in the limited, more or less colloquial sense, as having to do with productivity and machines. We would use a broad definition of innovation to include even seemingly small adaptive changes in existing machines. A shift from ropes to horse collars, increasing the ability of the animal to pull, is by this definition a technological advance, as is the invention of a modified, faster Xerox machine or computer.

3. Social Innovation

The term “social” is used here in a broad sense to include the invention of new arrangements, systems or styles in educational, political, economic, military and other dimensions. Innovation here is even more difficult to define than it is in the technological sphere, but would include new ways of organizing human effort (i.e., the corporation), new political institutions (parliaments), new ways of organizing war (Panzer blitzkrieg vs. trench warfare), etc.

4. Cultural-Value Shifts

Every society holds a set of unspoken assumptions, and carries out a great deal of unrationalized behaviour. It also manifests a value system. Changes in cultural axioms or values may trigger significant other changes. Example of a change in cultural assumptions: the unnoticed shift in the way men used time after the coming industrialism. (Conception of linear time, refined, carefully conditioned habits of punctuality, etc., based on need for synchronized work.) Example of a shift in value: The decline in the importance attached to property and/or virginity.

5. Ecological Shifts

Changes in human society may also be occasioned by changes in the natural ecology—the glacier moving down across Europe, the decline of the caribou population in Lapland, earthquake, tidal wave, the appearance of new kinds of crops because of transplantation from abroad, the pollution of rivers or oceans, etc. This would include the impact of climatic conditions on culture and personality, etc.

6. Information-Idea Shifts

The scope, quality and manipulability of knowledge all fall within this category, so that a scientific discovery, a new theory about race or child rearing, new verbalized conceptions about how-things-work, all exemplify change in the character and distribution of the knowledge pool. (Know-

ledge and information are here used interchangeably.)

7. Cultural Diffusion

Any transfer of ideas, values, or techniques from one culture to another, whether as a consequence of invasion, war, advertising, increased travel, etc. A significant difference exists, however, between cultural diffusion and the other six change factors, since it operates at a different level and can be said to incorporate the others. For example, when a production technique like the Bessemer furnace, deve-

loped in Europe, is imported to the United States, it can be said to be a cultural borrowing. But once in the United States it operates exactly like a Technical Innovation. One culture may borrow values or information from another. These, when introduced into the borrowing culture, represent Cultural-Value Shifts or Information-Idea Shifts. Cultural Diffusion, therefore, may take the form of any of the other change factors, and is defined purely in terms of origin outside the culture.