THE NEW HISTORY,  
THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA,  
THE NEW CONTREE

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THE NEW HISTORY

In a recent article entitled “The art of writing history”, Bill Freund pertinently observed that the “long-term project of South African historiography may be reaching exhaustion”.¹ This remark is only one amongst many expressing concern with the present state of the discipline.

The president of the South African Historical Association, Paul Maylam, in his assessment of current issues in historiography, also pointed to “tensions within the practice of history”. Maylam clearly shows that the present cul-de-sac in history is directly related to its narrow and limiting historiography; the system of production of knowledge; and the fact that specialized historical research is accessible to only a very privileged audience. Maylam concludes his address by appealing for the development of the discipline “in such a way that it gives greater recognition to the diversity of historical practice — in particular to the role of historians in transmitting critical accounts of the past to audiences other than fellow professionals, to students, to scholars, to a wider public”.²

This appeal for an expansion in the role of history acknowledges the major paradigmatic shifts that have occurred in the humanities in recent years. Methodologically, it is now possible to view the writing of history in the same way as any other literary exercise — as an open-ended practice. By interpreting the production of history as the production of texts, historians acknowledge the inescapable fact of a metanarrative perspective present in all writing, documenting, recording, ordering, synthesizing. In so far as no

historical account is ever a true reflection of what actually happened, the produced text can also never be the truth distilled out of carefully defined borders.

Thus we are no longer interested merely in the historicity of events/texts, but also in the textuality of events/history. Instead of the existing emphasis on ideology/doctrine, history should also be studied as textual practice. We acknowledge, in the words of Greenblatt, our “intensified willingness to read all of the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only on literary texts”.

Let us try to make this somewhat abstract reasoning a little more practical. Timothy Holmes has written a study on David Livingstone entitled Journey to Livingstone: exploration of an imperial myth. In his introduction, Holmes begins by dramatically describing the massive bronze statue of Livingstone overlooking the Victoria Falls. He records that on the plinth supporting the giant figure, one arm outstretched towards the north, a hagiographic plaque credits Livingstone with being the light of Africa, bringer of the Gospel, unshackler of slaves. Holmes is clearly trying to picture Livingstone as icon, monument, a historical being made rigid in an now unquestioned interpretation, as meaning cast in stone. The Livingstone in this perspective is majestic, all-conquering — but devoid of humanity, of reality, cast in the dead stone of monument, and closed interpretation, rather than the living stone of dynamic reinterpretation.

Holmes then continues with a brief account of what drew him to research the life of Livingstone. Rather than the lionization or reification of existing accounts, it was the foibles of this human being that attracted Holmes. In particular, Holmes was drawn by an unpublished letter from Livingstone to Prof. Sedgwick of Cambridge University (dated 6 February 1858) in which Livingstone pointed out that he had ulterior motives for penetrating Africa. Whilst interested in missionary work, and “the development of African trade and the promotion of civilization”, his primary motive, “what I tell to

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none but such as you in whom I have confidence is thus I hope it may result in an English colony in the healthy highlands of Central Africa”.

Holmes was startled by this letter and, in the course of further research, realized that beneath the surface of the canonized text of Livingstone were many other texts, some ignored, some only faintly discernible, some wiped out. These other accounts, other voices, other histories, not only opened up the myth of Livingstone cast in stone, but also brought a new methodological complexity into play. The truth about David Livingstone, the truth forged and applauded by so many notable historians has turned out to be nothing more than an imperial myth. Holmes ends his preface with the sentence: “such a palimpsest needs investigation”.

Clearly the emphasis in the study of history has shifted from monument to text, which is palimpsest. Literally, every text is the product of the broad variety of texts that preceded it, an intertextual fabric of different textual voices, all telling different (hi)stories, but creating one, living, ever changing, open history. In this new paradigm, history can no longer have only one meaning, or interpretation, because of the heteroglossia, the varied and opposing voices constituting the text of history. These are the faint parameters of the New History.

THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA
During this decade there have been increasing attacks on the intellectual ossification, conservatism, and complacency of the ‘establishment’ in South African history; the fact that our history seems trapped in a backwater of intellectual orthodoxy. The timorousness with which history departments greeted post-apartheid South Africa, mirrors what many feel was the failure of historians to provide direction and moral guidelines for society during the apartheid era.

A recent article has claimed that South African history helped fuel the anti-apartheid movement; and that, in contrast to the “dull, pro-apartheid history taught in schools, ... ‘people’s history’ ” turned

the discipline into something relevant and usable. This statement seems contradicted by prevailing sentiment. For instance, there have been a number of influential newspaper articles on the failure of history as a discipline. One was entitled, “First there is history — then come the facts” and another “ Enough of the Bunk”. The public was told that history in South Africa had become an exercise in situational ethics, that there were no facts, that one man’s hero was another man’s villain. The “sad truth is that groups through the ages have abused history and manipulated facts to serve their own, partisan, ideological hobby-horses. And South Africa is no exception to this rule”.

Recently Professor Herman Giliomee has referred to the “dwaesedanse en dwaalspore in Suid-Afrika se geskiedenis” — the dances of fools and the taking of wrong paths. Professor Giliomee is also quoted as saying that South African history has been largely unresponsive to the dramatic political changes of recent years. In the same article Professor Trumpelman is pessimistic about the survival of history as an autonomous discipline, and argues for an inter-disciplinary approach encompassing history, social studies and political science.

A joint conference of history teachers held at Potchefstroom in January 1996 culminated in the call for the drastic reorientation of history as a discipline. There was frequent reference to the “tyranny of the past”. Historians were in broad agreement that much of the history of previous decades had been zero-sum or adversarial history that undermined traditional distinctions about the nature, purpose and uniqueness of history. Many felt that the increasingly partisan nature of Marxist, liberal and Afrikaner nationalist schools during the apartheid era had destroyed any claim they might have had to represent historical objectivity and the moral high ground in South Africa.

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8 Sunday Times, 8 July 1990.
9 Joint conference of the Historical Association of South Africa and the South African Society for History Teaching, Potchefstroom, 10—12 January 1996.
Perhaps what really happened was that the white community had finally become aware of the extent to which it was deceived by historians and their abuse of history. Concurrently, the black community has begun to focus on its own past, and believes, in this first flush of optimism, that a new generation of historians will be able to provide an objective account of the past and an untrammelled view of the future.

Unremitting criticism during the past decade achieved little; South African history remained the redoubt of methodological conservatism propped up by career instrumentality. Now, however, in the mid-point of this pre-millennial decade, substantial change has come to society and the social sciences.

Firstly, South Africa has become a non-racial democracy and history has begun to reflect the concerns of the majority. The ‘top-down’ Rankean approach that once dominated Afrikaner nationalist historiography is giving way to methodologies stressing grassroots research.

Secondly, the crumbling of the Berlin Wall and the ideology that built and sustained that wall, have created an ‘apocalyptic fin de siècle mood’. This pessimistic mood is one result of the collapse of Marxism’s pretensions to being the totalizing discourse and privileged mode of capitalist analysis.

Berlin in 1953, Budapest 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland in 1980 all helped undermine the doctrine of historical materialism as workers themselves rose against the party. The drawn out military debacle in Afghanistan also exposed the structural weaknesses of the Communist regime. It has recently been suggested, however, that the sheer magnitude of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl was the final straw in undermining communist domination. As Grigori Medvedev has written, “the reactor was the nuclear time bomb, whose explosion signalled the death throes of an entire historical period ... an abscess long hidden within our society, had just burst ... now, as it rotted, the corpse of a bygone age

filled the air with the stench of radiation".11

The fall of communism also entailed the collapse of post-Enlightenment certainties; the predominating belief in reason, universal and scientifically objectifiable values and the ineluctability of progress all came to an end. The destruction of that existential solidity characterizing previous decades, and the emergence of a new cultural matrix predicated upon the burdens of human freedom, have created a growing spirit of perplexity. This alienation or *ver-fremdung* was compounded by the emergence of post-industrial economies in the West:

At the heart of the New Times is the shift from the old mass-production Fordist economy to a new, more flexible post-Fordist order based on computers, information technology and robotics. But New Times are about much more than economic change. Our world is being remade.12

Former poles of attraction have been dissipated by the unforgiving pace of change; nation-states, parties, professions, institutions and historical traditions, have all undergone ‘sea-changes’ and lost much in terms of loyalty and utility value.

The conflict between the modernity of the past, and post-modernism (or whatever) of the future is multi-faceted. In existing modernist ‘grand narratives’ — gender, ethnicity, economy, class, society, reason, nation, the self and so on, are all allocated leading roles in narratives of science and progress, of liberalism, socialism and conservatism. They are stacked up alongside other uniform, established, and familiar building blocks or givens in the basic repertoire of social scientists.13

These codified and pigeonholed identities, however, disguise the fact that they are contingent upon other societal constructs. They are not real, ‘objective’ entities in and of themselves, but instead are societal creations designed to handle the contemporaneous demands of power and the political order.

The postmodern emphasis rejects visions of society as a fixed, immutable system, totality or metanarrative. The accent is now upon our being in the world and thus being agents in the continuous recreation of society.

Discussion of the processes whereby society is constantly reproduced is closely related to hermeneutic activity because “to make the social is always to make meaning (in processes that may be conscious or not)”. It is for this reason that the reconfiguration of our academic vista has taken a distinctly linguistic turn. The challenge to metahistory has come especially from those engaged in semiotics and hermeneutics. This transformation may be viewed by some, as Tempelhoff put it in his review of the book *Studies in metahistory*, as “a post-modern attempt at understanding the transition that has taken place”. The opposite is also very true: the transition that has taken place, that brought the New South Africa into being, also dictates a democratisation that only a post-modern umbrella can cover. In trying to understand the intricate text of the New South Africa, we need to embrace the pluralistic methodology of heteroglossia.

**THE NEW CONTREE**

With this mouthful: Welcome to the *New Contree* — a nearly new name for a nearly new journal. Staying within the accreditation guidelines has prevented us from adopting an entirely new persona. Early in 1996, the University of North-West assumed responsibility for the journal. The major reason for this change was financial — Louis Grundlingh and the RAU History Department had exhausted their resources trying to keep the old *Contree* alive. The transfer of the journal indicates the somewhat limited academic interest in local, regional and urban history. The Annale School which advanced this particular locus is much less popular now, than in its heyday in the 1970s. Nevertheless, despite being less fashionable, the Annale approach remains of unquestionable value. The *New Contree* was partly born out of an impulse to protect the journal and the refuge it provides for neglected varieties of

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14 Ibid.
history and historians.

Apart from this wish to preserve, however, the New Contree was also the product of an antithetical desire to "slash and burn", to clear the decks in South African history, to begin afresh, to start anew. It reflects the growing sense of frustration many feel with the passivity of our practitioners of the past. It is also an opportunity to broaden the perspectives of the traditional fields of history, an opportunity to let all the previously marginalized voices of history speak. Let us be various!

"Everything has a history", Haldane once wrote. Burke interprets this as follows: "everything has a past which can in principle be reconstructed and related to the rest of the past." What Foucault achieved in The history of sexuality was to open history to every domain of human enquiry. The New Contree would like to be a vehicle facilitating the dialogue of this exciting new venture in history (which many regard as the father discipline in the humanities).

Whilst broadening the scope of the journal, we still acknowledge the importance of a forum for local regional and urban history. As editors we would like to continue offering sufficient space for articles on these specialized areas. This vision is also in line with the new history syllabi, that greater emphasis should be paid in future to teaching children the history of their specific region.

The New Contree will be set up like a household computer, with each edition being composed of a variety of interchangeable and pull-out files — which we term VOICES. Each voice will present a heteroglossic perspective — being separate and yet integral parts of the wider whole that is (South African) history. The first of these voices is, however, an INTERNATIONAL VOICE, a perspective pulsating the very heart-beat of the New Contree, in style, content and methodology. In this article Professor Allsup asks a fundamental question of those engaged in multicultural, multiracial history: whose history is it that is being written? Despite being engaged in a quest for 'truth', historians are often insensitive or unaware of the extent to which the prevailing societal genre/stereotypes have subverted their noble intent. The search

16 Burke (ed.) New perspectives, p. 3.
for objectivity implies neutrality and removing the bias(es) of race, gender, class and culture from our accounts. In other words we seek to rise above our own personal and group identities in order to provide as comprehensive and accurate an analysis as is possible.

Professor Allsup argues that an objective, value-free, bias-free history has thus far proved impossible. He points out that all history is construction, which in the West has largely been the product of white, elite, Eurocentric, heterosexual, Christian males. He focuses on the racial consciousness, cultural conceit, and religious beliefs of the European world that allowed it to reduce, indeed exterminate, millions of people. Out of a population of between twelve and twenty million indigeneis prior to white settlement, only some 250,000 native Americans remained by 1865. This process was justified in terms of the inevitability of primitive cultures giving way before Christianity and progress.

Professor Allsup's work validates the rationale behind the rejection of traditional narrative. In Rankean history, the historian's task was to strive for objectivity and the knowledge of what actually happened. Today this ideal is generally considered unrealistic for the reasons advanced by Professor Allsup; however hard we struggle to avoid the prejudices associated with colour, creed, class or gender, we cannot avoid looking at the past from a particular point of view. Cultural relativism is now viewed as an unavoidable element in historical creation. The fact is that our minds do not reflect reality directly and we perceive the world only through a network of conventions, schemata and stereotypes — which vary from one culture to another.

If we cannot avoid looking at the past from a particular point of view, then our understanding of the present, and particularly of conflict situations is surely enhanced by a presentation of opposing viewpoints. Traditional narrative focused on creating a crude harmony based on might is right and the predominating vision of the victors. Instead of domination, heteroglossia, being defined as 'varied and opposing voices', seeks consensus through an understanding of the diverse and contested positions.

The paper in the NATIONAL VOICE section of the journal is by
John Bottomley. This paper focuses on the predominantly punitive nature of South African historiography in which zero-sum or conflict-orientated history dominates interpretation. South African history in this decade has become like “a highway filled with angry drivers cursing each other and telling each other they don’t know how to drive when the real trouble was the highway itself”.  

Dr Bottomley attacks the three existing historiographical schools for brutalizing South African history and turning it into a weapon. He argues that what is needed is fundamental change. Instead of predominating meta-theories dating back to the Enlightenment, South African historians need to accept that they have entered an age of relativism with all its painful uncertainties and without an authentic metaphysical, humanistic or technical reality in which to believe.

Along with Giovanni Levy, Dr Bottomley suggests that the most attractive historiographical models for the future will be those that “emphasize the freedom of choice of ordinary people, their strategies, their capacities to exploit the inconsistencies or incoherences of social or political systems to find loopholes through which they can wriggle or interstices in which they can survive”.

The most credible means to make sense of the contested positions in South African history is offered by heteroglossia with its emphasis on transparency and dialogue rather than the domination of any one particular vision or voice.

The paper of Professor Gouws, in the THEORETICAL VOICE file, closely examines the current methodological cul-de-sac in historiography. Gouws asks fundamental questions about the methodology, myths and assumptions underlying the writing of history by linking this discipline with the dynamics inherent in Cultural Studies. Gouws argues in favour of a ‘poetics of memory’ by rejecting scientific objectivity, truth, ideology. He shows that historical memory constitutes what could be called, in the words of Ricoer, an “identity of culture”. He concludes that in a post-modern mode of thinking, heteroglossia as methodology is a way of re-thinking history.

In the file THE VOICE OF AFRICA we offer a paper by Kwabena Amankwah-Ayeh on 'Traditional planning elements of pre-colonial African towns'. This interesting perspective on the traditional planning of precolonial African structures (dwellings, houses, plazas, roads, walls, etc.) is not only a historic documentation, but also suggests ways in which current planning can incorporate an indigenous tradition in the planning and building human structures.

In this edition the article in the file REGIONAL VOICE is from Elize van Eeden. She researched the influence of water usage on the agricultural industry in an area in the North-West province. She documents the over-exploitation of alluvial water by the mines that led to the existing situation of sinkholes, contaminated water and a threatened agriculture.

This article could also easily have been in the file ENVIRONMENTAL VOICE, in which we are placing an article by Tim Goetze on the history and environmental impact of road building. It is clear from this paper that historians need to add their voices to the environmental debate. For in the view of the deep ecologists, humanity and nature are all one within a biotic community. Historians, therefore, must become the voice recording the history and exploitation of the voiceless.

As a way of introducing the commodity value of the discipline of history, we include a few advertisements and an announcement in the file COMMERCIAL VOICE. From the next issue we will also introduce CRITICAL VOICE, where we will have reviews and critical articles on new publications. We also envisage a YOUNG VOICE, where the emphasis will fall on cultivating a historical consciousness amongst the young. We will encourage history teachers and their students to do basic historiographical research on local history. There will also from time to time, be a file entitled TRAVELLING VOICE where there will be articles on specific historical sites and how to get there, what there is to see, things worth knowing, etc.

We hope that this smorgasbord of historical information will contribute to revitalizing the discipline of History, research and general interest in this field. We would like to have some comments and suggestions, which we might even consider placing under PER-
SONAL VOICE!
Yours, for History!