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# Does history teaching ask and answer relevant questions in a multicultural society?: some suggestions for enlarging the vision of history

The central theme of this conference, history teaching in a multicultural society, is one that exposes a number of raw nerve ends in the South African context. This sensitivity is particularly apparent when the perspective to be applied in this paper is considered. In the context of this paper culture, and more specifically multiculturalism, are considered to be part of a process of maintaining divisions and antagonism within South African society. And history, in as much as it is taught at school to orientate the pupil in the present in terms of the past, is also deployed to explain, justify and transmit the behaviour patterns that characterise contemporary South African society. Because many, particularly Blacks, have come to reject the *status quo* they have also come to reject the subject that has helped to legitimate the present history.

South Africa has been and is to varying degrees a divided society. Without wishing to delve into the polemics surrounding these divisions it can be said that the schisms have, in part, been attributed to cultural differences. It can be argued that these differences have been accentuated to obscure more material and political aims. Culture has been used to ordain the status of groups within the broader spectrum of South African society. Here culture is used in the sense of the "totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population" (Morris; 1973 : 321). And the emphasis is on "socially transmitted behaviour patterns, . . . beliefs, [and] institutions."

There can be little doubt that current history school texts are informed by the dominant culture, that of Whites. Mphahlele (1974 : 35) does not attribute this dominance

to any intrinsic superiority but "the dominant culture (dominant only because it is economically prosperous and has the political patronage of the ruling class) happens to be that of the minority Caucasian group. It has refused by constitutional and statutory physical apartheid to share in the wealth of African culture. Come the day when the tables are turned, the white man will have to choose to quit or adopt the majority African culture or be marooned by history, go the way of the Saan [sic], those poor victims of benign neglect." It is further contended that: "Once culture begins to thrive on the bosom of nationalism and a defensive nationalism a[t] that, the culture loses its power to creatively transform society. The culture becomes a survival culture and thus fails to generate new meanings and symbols for people to cherish" (Manganyi; 1981a : 68). Another commentator cannot understand how he can be turned away from western culture and told to involve himself in his own culture, when all that it represents is held up as the badge that symbolises his backwardness. Like being asked to conduct himself like the noble savage and at the same time "to conform to the stereotype which answers to 'boy'" (Modisane; 1986 : 178). These three viewpoints all reflect misgivings about the concept of culture as applied in the South African context that have an important bearing on the conceptualization of this paper. It is apparent that there is a clear understanding of the contradictions inherent in the usage of the term culture. More specifically there is an unambiguous rejection of a multicultural approach, even though there is a recognition of cultural differences. Instead the gist of the contentions here cited is that there should be a common culture that reflects the diversity of South African society without creating those conditions that allow for the exclusion of



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any group within that society from benefiting from the perceived benefits of the culture that arises from a shared society. It is also interesting to note that while there is a rejection of western civilization that much traditional African culture has been static and has "over the past decades made Africa the world's human zoo and museum of human evolution" (Ndebele: 1972 : 26). Because history can be considered to be one of the prime means of transmitting cultural values it is as well to consider some of the criticisms made of history in South Africa by those who have had little, if any, say in how the syllabi are formulated or how the subject is taught.

Matthews claimed that: "History is worn by a people like part of its national dress and where two people have shared in a series of events, their respective versions are startlingly different in cut, colour, and pattern. As African students in a land dominated by Europeans, we were in a peculiarly uncomfortable position. Our history, as we had absorbed it from the tales and talk of our elders, bore no resemblance to South African history as it had been written by European scholars, or as it is taught in South African schools, and as it was taught to us as Fort Hare. The European insisted that we accept his version of the past, and what is more, if we wanted to get ahead educationally, even to pass examinations in the subject as he presents it. It was one thing to accept willingly and even eagerly the white man's world of literature and science. It was quite another to accept his picture of how we all came to occupy the places in life now assigned to us . . . If it was difficult for us to accept the white man's account of his own past doings, it was utterly impossible to accept his judgements on the actions and behaviour of Africans, of our own grandfathers in our own lands. Yet we had to give back in our examination papers the answers the white man expected. So we approached history as one does an unavoidable ordeal; all steeled up and determined to get through it somehow" (Matthews; 1983 : 58-9). Implicit in Matthews viewpoint is that history is seen as an inimical subject that serves no function other than to provide an academic credit. If it did anything it was to convince those doing history that it was based on a fabric of falsification that made a very ill-fitting suit of cultural identity. Thus Blacks were not only alienated from their cultural roots, and made to think that these were reprehensible, but they were also gradually estranged from the culture that had distorted their past. Or as Biko (1973 : 95) put it far more succinctly, "colonialism is never satisfied with having the native in its grip but, by some strange logic, it must turn to his past and disfigure and destroy it. Hence the history of the black man in this country is most disappointing to read.

It is presented merely as long succession of defeats." He continues: "We would be naive to expect our conqueror to write unbiased histories but we have to destroy the myth that our history starts in 1652" (ibid. : 95). A recent study has shown that the indictment of the bias and the "writing off" of blacks in South African history texts is scattered throughout the writings of many prominent black South African intellectuals (Gebhard; 1988a : 10-22). More detailed studies of events like the Mfecane and the Great Trek show that there is a persistent rejection of those historical interpretations that have so dominated South African history writing until recently (Gebhard, 1988b : 1988c : 28-30; and 1990 : 1-15).

What is apparent from the various works cited above by this author is that the certainties of South African history that have been used to legitimate the present are no longer accepted as blandly or as uncritically as they might have been previously. While there is little indication of a rejection of the fundamental syllabi by the critics referred to previously there is little doubt that they all query the way the content of these syllabi is presented. One needs to consider the view of Thompson (1990 : 1) that "School curricula foreshorten the historical record by focusing on recent events. People lack a sense of their location in time and fail to perceive that contemporary society is constrained by its cultural and biological inheritance", and determine whether the criticism in this statement is justified. In order to do this one will have to look at the central themes as they can be discerned from some of the "standard" history texts.

The works used to formulate these themes are the following: Joubert (1982), Van Jaarsveld and Van Wijk (1974), Joubert and Britz (1981), Boyce (1974), Boyce (1978) and Joubert and Jooste (1973). It should be noted that no attempt has been made to distinguish between the themes as they feature in each standard. Rather a synthesis has been made of the themes from the various sources and placed within a chronological sequence. It is also not intended to directly criticise the approach to the individual theme identified by specific authors. To attempt such an exercise would far exceed the constraints placed by time and space on this paper. And while there is ample space for criticism of the works consulted it does not seem reasonable to attack the interpretations given without affording their originators the chance to reply. Instead an attempt will be made to formulate the questions that are implicit in the presentation of the content and what the problems are related to the way these questions are formulated. It must be remembered that the nature of history is largely determined by the nature of the question that is asked of the past. More attention will be given to the latter viewpoint later. For now the central themes need to be listed. Briefly these are the following:

1. Pre-colonial societies;
2. Voyages of discovery;
3. The first Dutch settlement at the Cape;
4. The expansion of the Cape Colony;
5. Frontier wars;
6. The Great Trek and the Mfecane;
7. Relations between Boers and Africans;
8. Relations between the Boer republics and the British;



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9. The mineral revolution;
10. The South African War, 1899-1902;
11. Unification and subsequent constitutional and political developments; and
12. The founding of the Republic of South Africa and political, economic and social developments thereafter, including foreign relations.

While it is reassuring that there is some reference to pre-colonial societies, it is worrying that these people are portrayed as static entities. A relevant question to be asked in this instance is how these societies came into being. This is essential if subsequent developments are to be properly understood. The modes and relations of production with their concomitant social structures and cultural values have to be grasped if developments subsequent to the arrival of Whites are to be understood. A very useful and comprehensible text that could be utilised in this regard is that of Hall (1988).

There seems to be little point to asking when the voyages of discovery took place in regard to South Africa. A far more pertinent question would be to ask why the Portuguese came to Africa. Granted that while there was an element of curiosity, there was also the aim of gaining profit and wealth through trade and the exploitation of the resources that were presumed to exist in the territories hitherto unknown to the western world. In this way the foundations could be laid for the events that followed on the heels of the establishment of the Dutch settlement at the Cape.

It seems ironic that a great deal of attention is given to the conflict between the burgers of the Cape and the Dutch East India Company. It is correctly asked why there was conflict between these factions, with the emphasis on the burgers' struggle for their rights. But when relations between burgers and company on the one hand, and the indigenous people on the other, are brought into focus a different set of criteria are applied. It is not a struggle for the rights of the aborigines, but a battle for the physical survival of a civilization borne by the settlers against the 'forces of darkness' represented by the indigenous people. Should the question not rather be, "Why did the indigenous people take up arms against the intrusions of the settlers?" An important adjunct of this question is why did the aborigines adopt the particular form of struggle that they did? In this way one could overcome the oft held view that Blacks were inherently thieves and that their cattle-raiding was merely the manifestation of the standards of a barbaric people. That is why it is important to properly understand how pre-colonial society functioned, and thus indicate what the reactions of a people would be who saw the basis of their livelihood being threatened and encroached upon. A further question to be raised is what the consequences of missionary activity

were on traditional society. In addition it must be asked whether the missionaries only brought Christianity but also cultural values and norms that impinged on those of the people they were active amongst.

Unfortunately the expansion of the Cape frontier and the Great Trek and the Anglo-Boer War of 1880-81 represent a lost opportunity in the field of using history as a means of reconciliation in South Africa. Much is made of why the Boers took up arms against the British. But this paradigm is not applied in relations between Boers and Blacks. Surely, if the Boers can be portrayed as a people fighting for their freedom, then Blacks can, by the same token, be shown to be struggling for the same ideal that the Boers were? And on the topic of the Great Trek, is it not time that more attention was paid to motives other than the ideological ones? And should attention not be paid to the problem of conflicting material interests? Were not Boers and Africans pastoralists and agriculturalists fighting for control of the same resources? One cannot deny that there was a good deal of conflict related to the expansion of the White frontier, and this should not be swept under the carpet. But one should also be looking to find those points of commonality between the conflicting communities.

It might have been noted that in the period up to the Anglo-Boer War no distinction has been made between Dutch and British colonial governments. This has been done deliberately. Most Black historians do not make a clear distinction between these two phases of colonialism (Gebhard; 1988a : 46-51), even though there are slight differences in emphasis. What is clear is that most of the historians see the establishment of a colony here, under whatever guise, as a turning point. Similarly there is a frequent realisation that colonization not only brought about material changes, but also changes in cultural values. And very often these cultural changes were wrought to facilitate the process of colonization. Therefore it is not surprising that many of the historians analysed should be critical of a culture that destroyed another to enable it to expand and entrench itself. And till today one should not be surprised at the rejection of the claim to cultural superiority and the need to protect it through devices such as apartheid. Therefore it is perhaps apposite that a good deal of attention should be paid to culture and cultural formation.

Generally the Mfecane is dealt with contemporaneously with the frontier wars. Again here there is little attempt to understand the causes of this event, nor to identify the broader ramifications of the upheavals except as a confirmation of the inherent 'savagery' of Africans. School texts cannot be blamed for relying on 'standard' interpretations. Nevertheless authors and teachers would be well advised to consider the research that has been initiated by Cobbing (1988). The salient point of Cobbing's article is that he questions the origins of the Mfecane, and concludes that the origins must be sought in the Cape and the emancipation of slaves. Naturally this places an even more cogent question mark over the deployment of the Mfecane as proof of the 'savagery' of Blacks, and the justification of apartheid through this 'proof'.

When looking to the events after 1870 and the mining



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revolution, the focus in the questions asked of these occurrences appears to be on proving British perfidy and avarice and justifying Boer reactions to these developments. It would be of far greater benefit to all concerned if the focus fell on the socioeconomic transformations that resulted from the mineral discoveries. Urbanisation and its cultural impact is ignored. If the nature of culture is to an extent determined by the environment in which it is formed then we should be looking at cultural adaptations to the new situation in which Black and White found themselves in the towns and cities. We must ask ourselves why it was that Whites successfully adapted to the new situation while Blacks were unable to urbanise successfully. And it appears that the answer to this question must be sought in legislative measures rather than in some mysterious cultural or intellectual "retardation" that made it impossible for Blacks to adapt to the changed circumstances.

The answers to these inquiries are closely linked to the way that one approaches the South African War of 1899-1902. It should also be noted that the use of the term Anglo-Boer War is as anachronistic as the Second War of Independence. Unless one is pandering to sectional cultural interests these terms have no relevance to teaching history in a multicultural society, although they might be used to illustrate how history can be used to serve sectional interests. The focus in an evolving new South Africa should fall on common experiences rather than stressing divisions.

The approach to the South African War appears to be based on the question of why the war broke out. And even here the answers seem bent on underlining British imperialist aggression and the outraged innocence of the Republics. What happened to the people who bore the brunt of the war after the politicians had precipitated the crisis that led to the conflagration is largely ignored. If one is looking to a shared past then this surely would be an area to start. Bullets and the scorched earth campaign did not stop to ask what race the targets were, and were definitely not aware of the claim that this was a 'White man's war'. Warwick (1980 and 1983) has done much to remove the war from the realm of 'great men' and exposed the lives of those who were probably more closely affected. One needs to ask what life was like for those were swept up in the war. Why is it that much is made of Boer fatalities in the concentration camps, when Spies (1978 : 265-6) conservatively estimates the number of fatalities amongst Blacks at 13 315?

If the treatment of the war suffers from a very narrow

vision then the post-war settlement requires even more attention. When reconstruction comes under the microscope the myth of the 'white man's war' is perpetuated. One needs to ask why Blacks were omitted from the development programmes that were initiated in South Africa. Of equal importance is to ascertain what the consequences were for Blacks of this deliberate oversight.

Similar questions can be posed of the national convention. It is insufficient to say that the omission of Blacks was merely to prevent of the African franchise would be dealt with subsequently. With the national convention Blacks suddenly seem to disappear from the stage only to reappear with the implementation of apartheid as the solution to a 'problem'. Why has it never been asked what the African reaction was to the betrayal of the national convention? Why has the founding of the ANC in 1912 been ignored? Why has the policy of the ANC at the time been ignored? Perhaps, if these questions had been asked and answered, then F.W. de Klerk would not have had to state on February 2, 1990 that he wished to remove those reasons that were claimed by the ANC and PAC to be their motives for adopting strategies of violence.

Could the failure to grant Blacks the vote in 1910 not be taken as an example of what can happen to a people if they are denied the vote? Would this not be an ideal example for pupils to protect elements of their political culture like the vote? What happened to the limited rights of Blacks after 1910 of which the land acts of 1913 and 1936, the franchise act of 1936 and the various urban areas acts after 1926 are but a few examples of what can happen to the disenfranchised denied redress through the ballot box. The search for the answers to these questions might prove very instructive to white pupils who might have been brought up in the belief that they were part of a just and equitable system. Similarly they might also be better able to understand the antagonism that Blacks might harbour towards them and work towards eradicating the animosity.

Another set of certainties that has been propagated in regard to the period after 1910 is that of industrialization. There is no doubt that South Africa underwent a period of tremendous industrial growth after unification. But the question never seems to be asked why it was that only Whites reaped the material benefits from this development. Nor is Black reaction to their exclusion from the economic transformation considered. If any mention is made of Black unions then it is generally to mention that they had become the tools of communist agitators. The fact that Black unions were legally discriminated against or forbidden is not mentioned. Nor is there any attempt to analyse the functions of trade unions.

Those themes that deal with political and constitutional developments after 1910 have a virtually exclusive emphasis on those which affected Whites. It is nearly as if the assignment of the 'Black problem' to the homelands has already taken place. Never is the question raised as to what in fact happened to Blacks after unification, except to occasionally mention them as some sort of 'problem'. It is carefully omitted to mention how Blacks reacted to the machinations of successive governments to reduce the



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power of Blacks. No parallels are drawn between the Afrikaners' struggle for a republic and the simultaneous disempowerment of Blacks. More importantly no question is asked of what the consequences of this were for Blacks. Thus White pupils are never required to question the *status quo*.

The above imbalance in history is seen in the monuments honouring the heroes of past decades from the age of the generals on. Small wonder that Manganyi (1981a : 69) comments: "The partisan heroes of the past will not do for the future of this country and its people. The new heroes will consist of those of our people who, without regard to questions of colour, will assist the country out of the grip of the siege cultures of Afrikanerdom and black consciousness." Blacks no longer wish to indulge in irrelevant holidays that are a reminder of the humiliation of defeat according to Biko (1978 : 30). When dealing with South Africa in the modern world passing reference is made to South Africa's isolation in the international community. The answer to this problem is stated to be in the reaction to South Africa's racial policies. But it is not asked nor answered why this antagonism towards South Africa should exist. South Africa is not placed in the context of a world that changed most dramatically in the years after 1945 – changed to a world where racism and colonialism had become anathema to most of the world. No consideration is given to the viewpoint expressed by Ngubane (1963 : 37) that: "When Dr. Verwoerd elected to leave the Commonwealth rather than modify the temper of the slave owner, he was merely taking the position assumed by Piet Retief more than a hundred years ago, in an almost similar situation."

It is fitting that the beginning of the end of this paper should be introduced by the understanding of an aspect of South African history based on an analogy with past events. In the paper that has chosen to address such a broad spectrum of issues it is not surprising that no

detailed questions could be formulated. Rather it was decided to indicate the direction that could be taken in asking questions of the past. It is appreciated that some of the suggestions will undermine some of the certainties on which white culture in the sense of "socially transmitted behaviour patterns, . . . belief, [and] institutions" is based. And no doubt some of the avenues of enquiry suggested will be close to traumatic for those who have been nurtured on a set of certainties based on a peculiar interpretation of the South African past. However, it is felt that unless this nettle is grasped and pupils come to grips with the reality of the South African past then there is little chance for the growth of a culture that will be acceptable to all. The above quotation from Ngubane is also indicative of the conflict that exists about the interpretations of South African history which have led to specific cultural patterns. It must be realised that while history is used to propagate cultural and thus political divisions the chances of South Africans finding one another are minimal. Obviously most of the existing text books would not lend themselves to the directions indicated in this paper. Therefore a threefold approach is suggested that might contribute towards the creation of a common culture based on a common historical consciousness. The three approaches required to achieve this objective are:

1. A curriculum that is formulated by representatives of all South Africans, rather than by what Mphahlele (op cit) called the "dominant . . . minority Caucasian group."
2. Due cognisance must be taken of Thompson's (op cit) statement that: "People lack a sense of their location in time and fail to perceive that contemporary society is constrained by its cultural and biological inheritance", in the formulation of the curriculum. And, as important, one should not lose sight of the more distant past for the sake of the near obsession with the present.
3. Text books must be written that reflect the totality of the South African past and not be directed towards sectional cultural interests. Care should be taken not to create a more comprehensive textbook that addresses some of the problems highlighted here, but still continues to treat the lot of Black and White as separate entities.

It is hoped that some of the suggestions made during the course of this paper will contribute to overcoming the divisions that have been created in South Africa in deference to multiculturalism.

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