UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED SOCIAL RESEARCH

SEMINAR PAPER
TO BE PRESENTED IN THE RICHARD WARD BUILDING
SEVENTH FLOOR, SEMINAR ROOM 7003
AT 4PM ON THE **12 AUGUST 1996**.

TITLE: Identity, Race, History: South Africa and the
Pan-African Context

BY: **RAN GREENSTEIN**

NO: 405

Identity, Race, History: South Africa and the Pan-African Context[1]

Ran Greenstein (Education Policy Unit, University of the Witwatersrand)

(Work in Progress!)

1. Introduction

To study a society from a comparative perspective is rarely a straightforward matter. A series of strategic decisions regarding topics, time-frames, and angles of observation must be taken before any such project can begin. Since all societies are composed of multiple institutional spheres, and many potential avenues of investigation of scholarly and political interest exist, no obvious way of proceeding with any comparative endeavour is likely to present itself. Appropriate angles for investigation are determined by what appear at any given point as relevant aspects of social life, suitable theoretical perspectives, and specific time and space co-ordinates for any particular project. None of these factors are static, and as a result no fixed agendas for comparative inquiry can be established. The study of South African society is no exception to this general rule, and research agendas should therefore be constantly reviewed in order to keep them attuned to shifting social and scholarly concerns.

In the case of post-apartheid South Africa, it is argued in this chapter, the considerations outlined above imply that we need to reorient the existing comparative agenda towards engagement with questions of identity, culture, and racial formation in Africa and the African Diaspora - in other words, to reinsert South Africa in the context of the African continent and its new world offsprings. This reorientation is not mutually exclusive with the continued and justified concern with other comparative dimensions. It should serve, however, to focus attention on hitherto neglected issues and to open up new avenues of exploration that can shed light not only on the questions of culture and identity discussed here, but also on questions of class and state that so far have been at the centre of scholarly concern in the field of South African studies.

Without doubt, the most important gap in the comparative literature on South Africa is the dearth of material looking at its history and society in the African setting. The course taken by political developments in South Africa since the 1950s is chiefly responsible for this state of affairs. The decisive move by the apartheid government to deny indigenous people any form of representation in the central structures of power, let alone full-fledged political independence, and the reinforcement of white supremacy precisely when it was beginning to crumble elsewhere, can be clearly contrasted with the growing trends towards decolonization and freedom from white rule that became evident in the rest of the continent. In addition, the rise and successes enjoyed by the civil rights movement in the United States, at a time when the South African liberation movements were severely beaten and driven underground and into exile, called attention to the factors that led to such different outcomes, in situations that historically exhibited many similar features of discriminatory legislation, political disenfranchisement, social segregation and labour servitude.

For much of the 1960s and the 1970s African countries were consistently marching forward to a future characterised by political independence. Although independence was frequently accompanied by

---

1

continued economic dependence, and by numerous other social problems, the specific problem of white domination was not among them. South Africa on the other hand was undergoing protracted and violent conflict focused precisely on this issue, and it seemed increasingly clear that political emancipation there would take on a form that was bound to be different from elsewhere in Africa. A common analogy drawn at the time, primarily by the sociological race relations literature popular in the 1960s, was to classify South Africa together with other African societies that had substantial white settler populations, such as French Algeria, British Rhodesia and Portuguese Angola. The obvious distinctive feature of South Africa - the absence of a mother country for the majority of settlers, and the implications of this reality for their future political prospects - was not seen as crucially important; consequently it was not taken systematically into account. Demographic relations and ensuing conflicts between clearly bounded population groups, rather than historical patterns of social and cultural interconnection, thus became major foci for comparative inquiry.[2]

The research agendas of the 1970s and the 1980s were shaped by somewhat similar concerns, though within a different context. The collapse of white settler regimes in Africa (with the exception of Namibia - frequently seen in terms of the larger South African question) resulted in a shift of interest towards other societies undergoing acute political crises in the context of settler rule, such as northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine. The consistent fascination with these conflicts on the international stage, and the spectacular display of indigenous resistance as manifested in the Soweto uprising in South Africa and the Day of the Land in Israel/Palestine - both in the first half of 1976 - gave this angle great appeal.[3]

Another, perhaps more important and analytically productive focus in the comparative literature that gained even greater currency at the same time, was on the United States. The renewed impetus of the South African liberation struggle in the 1970s made the comparison with similar struggles for racial equality in the USA particularly compelling. This frequently extended to other aspects of the history of these societies.[4] Still another trend in the literature, centred on questions of economic development and class organisation, became common with the rise of the labour movement in the 1980s, using Latin America as a primary angle for comparison.[5]

---

[2] L. Kuper, 'The Theory of the Plural Society, Race and Conquest', in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris, 1980), pp. 239-66.

[3] S. Farsoun, 'Settler Colonialism and Herrenvolk Democracy', in *Israel and South Africa: The Progression of a Relationship*, edited by R. Stevens and A. Elmessiri (New York, 1976), pp. 13-21; S. Greenberg, *Race and the State in Capitalist Development: Comparative Perspectives* (New Haven, 1980); H. Giliomee H. and J. Gagiano (eds), *The Elusive Search for Peace: South Africa, Israel and Northern Ireland* (Cape Town, 1990); R. Greenstein, *Genealogies of Conflict: Class, Identity and State in Palestine/Israel and South Africa* (Hanover, 1995); M. Younis, 'Class, Resources and Resistance: A Comparative Study of National Liberation Movements in South Africa and Palestine, 1910s-1993', Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation. University of California-Berkeley, 1996.

[4] G. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (New York, 1981); H. Lamar and L. Thompson (eds), *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven, 1981); J. Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy* (New York, 1982).

[5] G. Seidman, Manufacturing Militance: *Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970-1985* (Berkeley, 1994).

And yet, with all the important ground covered by these studies on their varied dimensions, a very critical question was neglected. Throughout the twentieth century the majority of South Africans have been indigenous Africans whose cultures, identities, religions, languages and forms of artistic expression show significant affinities with those of their neighbours north of the Limpopo River. European Colonial rule in South Africa was moulded by the imperatives and challenges of rule over large populations whose modes of social organisation and ways of life exhibited similar (though by no means identical) patterns to those found in other parts of the continent. Geographical and climatic challenges have also linked South Africa to its neighbours. Even in the sphere of economic development, in which the logic of capitalism and its modes of organisation are supposed to operate independently of any considerations external to the quest for profits, South African history has been given a specific form by the features of its African environment. That these African connections and affinities have not occupied a prominent role in comparative studies, as well as in the broader field of South African studies, has little to do with failure to recognise their existence. Rather it is the intellectual agendas that dominate scholarly work, and the social and political relations that underpin them, that are central to our understanding of the marginal role Africa has occupied in this field. A shift in our approach to the study of South African society is thus a necessary step in the reorientation of the comparative project towards Africa.

Whether we look at the race relations school that occupied a central role in American sociology for much of the century, or at the Africanist history produced by British and British-trained academics in the wake of independence on the continent, or at the various Marxist perspectives that have dominated South African studies since the 1970s - similar problems afflict them all. They take racial and ethnic identities for granted: while frequently recognising that these identities are the outcomes of prolonged historical processes, and that they have not sprung into existence in a full-fledged form from nowhere, they nonetheless assume that only the end result of processes of identity formation is of interest, not the processes in themselves. Alternatively, in more hostile vein, they dismiss the concern with identity as a deviation from and obstruction to the development of proper modes of identification, usually seen as national and working class in form.

Thus advocates of the various strands of the pluralist school of race and ethnicity regard South Africa as a society comprising different groups that fight among themselves over access to and control over economic and political resources. The processes that gave rise to these groups in their present shape, the roads that were and were not taken, and which made such conflicts meaningful to their members as group-based contestations, are frequently left out of the analysis. The distribution of resources and the allocation of power on the one hand, and the formation of collective identities on the other, have been mutually entangled processes, however, in the old as well as the new South Africa.

The common wisdom of orthodox Marxism used to be that identity was no more than a form of false consciousness,[6] a disguise for relations of exploitation that allowed the dominant class to entrench its rule over gullible subjects. Despite its crudity this view resonated well with the realities of apartheid, which seemed to live up to the worst expectations of Marxists. The manipulations of race and ethnicity, backed up by a massive repressive apparatus, and the use of notions of culture, self-determination and national homelands in the service of reprehensible policies of dispossession and

---

[6] M. Legassick, 'South Africa: Capital Accumulation and Violence', *Economy and Society*, 3, pp. 253-291; M. Burawoy, 'The Capitalist State in South Africa: Marxist and Sociological Perspectives on Race and Class', in *Political Power and Social Theory*, edited by M. Zeitlin (Greenwich: 1981), pp. 279-335.

violation of human rights, gave credibility to the case against identity as a positive focus of analysis. Ultimately, however, the value of this approach proved limited as it failed to grant any role to people's own sense of self and collective being.

Although some die-hard activists and scholars still retain the total aversion to identity as an academic concern as well as a political force, others have moved to a position that refuses to reduce identity to the expression or suppression of class interests, and recognises its value in allowing people to draw on their legacies and cultures as they come to terms with the challenges of the present.[7] A recent expression of this approach is provided in an authoritative overview of modern South African history, in which the author urges particular attention to 'the remnant identities and particularisms which have been so powerful in shaping the ideas of the mass of the people in the country'. This leads to a focus on 'the vitality of discrete rural localities, the salience of ethnicity, the fragmented patterns of urban social life, the multiplicity of religious expression[8] - all of which are shaped by 'the powerful social legacies of pre-colonial societies'.[9]

Even this sophisticated version of Marxist-inspired social history stops short, however, of acknowledging that identities can be examined in their own terms, without seeking to attribute their impact to other and invariably more primary concepts such as the social relations of production, the dislocation of rural society, the quest for political power, the maintenance of patriarchal relations, and the assertion of masculinity.[10] These explanations, while frequently valuable in pointing to important social issues, are usually couched in an alien language that avoids addressing the specific ethnic and racial media used to articulate such concerns. For this is the crucial point advanced here - the insistence on the need to tackle identity directly, in general theoretical terms as well as in the specific study of South African society seen in the African context.

This formulation begs the questions of what exactly is meant by identity, how does one study it historically, and what are its implications for the study of South Africa from a comparative perspective. While the concept of identity has a critical personal dimension, and is a core concept in developmental psychology, its usage here is restricted to the collective dimension - the ways in which people come to identify themselves with such categories as race, nation, ethnic group, religion and tribe, all of which convey in their different ways notions of common descent and shared destiny, and are frequently sustained by an institutional infrastructure of some sort. Identity is a process that unfolds over time, and its components are subject to change - rather than a repertoire of cultural elements that stand in fixed relation to each other. Although at any given point a specific identity may seem to its adherents and to those residing outside its boundaries as having always existed in essentially the same form, this is rarely if ever the case. The emergence, internal shift of terms, and modification of their relation to

[7] B. Bozzoli (ed), *Class, Community and Conflict* (Johannesburg, 1987; L. Vail (ed), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley, 1989).

[8] W. Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Oxford, (1994), pp. 4-5.

[9] *ibid*, p. 16.

[10] R. Miles, *Capitalism and Unfree Labour: Anomaly or Necessity?* (London, 1987); G. Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood* (Johannesburg, 1992); P. Harries, 'Imagery, Symbolism and Tradition in a South African Bantustan: Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Inkatha, and Zulu History', *History and Theory*, 32 (1993), pp. 105-125; R. Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood* (New York, 1994), pp. 233-254.

other identities are of the essence of all known identities, and the most suitable manner of examining them is thus historical.

To examine identity historically means to realize that changes in modes of collective identification can be traced and analyzed in their connections to other social processes unfolding at the same time. Although it has been argued earlier that identity must be studied in its own terms, this does not imply that it could or should be examined in isolation from its historical context. On the contrary, only in relation to other social, economic and political developments can the shifts in the meanings of identity become comprehensible. It is important not to fall into one of the two common traps in the study of identity: to look at it as a reflection of something else of greater intrinsic importance on the one hand, and to study it in a historical vacuum, without recognising how it shapes and is shaped by other processes, on the other. To avoid these traps we must establish the links between the specific features of identity at any given point in time and the contemporary (as well as historical) social and political concerns with which it resonates. In this way we should be able to account for the fact that social concerns which are not ethnic or racial in themselves (such as struggles over material resources), may nevertheless be expressed through the medium of identity instead of other possible media. This does not mean that identity is 'explained' by or can be reduced to such historical linkages. Although necessary to any explanation, the context within which identity emerges and changes is insufficient as an explanatory factor for the spread and hold a given identity has over a group of people. The analysis has to go beyond it to explore the terms in which identity is experienced internally and expressed outwardly by its constituencies.

What is the relevance of these reflections for the study of identity from a comparative perspective? Since identity emerges and operates in contexts that can be properly studied only in their specificity, and since comparative inquiry is of necessity oriented towards general concerns beyond the details of each case study, a trade-off between the historical and the comparative imperatives seems inevitable. To study identity comparatively thus means to pay more attention to the contextual (and more readily generalised and theorised) factors and de-emphasise idiosyncratic (and therefore less comparable) factors than would be the case in a strictly focused historical inquiry. At the same time, a concern with comparison across cases and with the conceptual and theoretical implications of the study should not lead us to abandon the quest for historical specificity. A compromise between these two imperatives would probably not satisfy strict adherents of any investigative strategy, but is the best way forward. The comparative study of identity is thus by its very nature an interdisciplinary enterprise. This approach has distinctive consequences with regard to the study of South Africa, seen as a wholly racialised society, an integral part of the African continent.[11]

2. Race and the Study of South African Society

The paradox facing us is not new. No country on earth has been associated in the popular imagination with the concept of race to the same extent as South Africa has. And yet, there must be very few places in which the academic community has actively neglected the study of race to the same extent as in South Africa.[12] Of course, the racial aspects of legislation, division of labour, politics and ideology

---

[11] T. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, 1992).

[12] This does not apply to such areas as literature and popular culture of course. TV sitcoms and soaps such as *Going Up* and *Egoli*, and talk shows, frequently offer more honest and illuminating treatments of racial

have been extensively studied in South African studies, as well as in the comparative literature on South Africa,[13] but rarely from a position that recognises that race has any significance other than a device to facilitate and legitimise land dispossession, labour exploitation and political domination.[14] Race thus has been accounted for in external terms of class and state interests, prejudice and irrationality. I wish to argue here to the contrary that:

(1)   race is a basic organising principle of social relations and practices and therefore it should be studied in its own right;

(2)   the meanings of race emerge and shift in political and cultural processes which involve contestation between social actors;

(3)   race is not merely an imposition from above but also has an indigenous dimension, with which scholarly concern is long overdue;

(4)   the elements outlined above of racial formation not only *can* be studied comparatively, but would actually be difficult to analyse and comprehend in any other way.[15]

Studying race in its own right means looking at it as a historically-emergent identity which shapes action in significant ways. This entails examining the manner in which social relations and practices acquire and in turn impart racial meanings through political contestation. It is important, however, not to regard race as a narrowly defined political construct. Although they emerge in a process of contestation, racial meanings are not necessarily generated in or directly impact on the formal state and party-political arena. Rather they are shaped on many terrains which include culture, geography, gender, scholarship and media. The goal of analysis should not be to identify the overarching terrain (be it state, class, ideology or biology) that shapes all others, but rather to examine specific constellations of forces that emerge and operate in given situations. Specificity should not be taken to mean that racial meanings are restricted to a particular space/time configuration. When racial images and conceptualisations are disseminated through world-wide networks, race has broken out of the confines of any single country.[16] The terrains of media and culture are particularly interesting in this respect. They do not merely reflect pre-existing popular images and conceptualisations of race but frequently serve to construct these very racial representations by advancing notions of traditional practices (healing, initiation, fighting), physical and mental traits (energy, laziness, defiance, criminality,

---

interactions than can be found in most academic discussions.

[13] For example, Greenberg, *Race and the State in Capitalist Development*.

[14] For a major exception see S. Dubow, *Scientific Racism in South Africa* (Cambridge, 1995).

[15] These suggestions draw on the racial formation perspective as developed in M. Omi and H. Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York, 1986) and H. Winant, *Racial Conditions* (Minneapolis, 1994). It has been applied to South Africa in R. Greenstein, 'Racial Formation: Towards a Comparative Study of Collective Identities in South Africa and the United States', *Social Dynamics*, 19, 2 (1993), pp. 1-29. Useful reflections drawn from the British experience can be found in J. Rutherford (ed), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London, 1990).

[16] P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London, 1993).

stubbornness, acquiescence, size of various bodily organs), cultural tastes (in dress, music, food), family patterns (polygamy, women's subordination), religious values (the role of ancestor spirits) and various other social aptitudes.[17]

All these have nothing to do with race as a biological concept, but they acquire racial meanings through their association with what is commonly defined as race in the distinctive South African context. This does not apply only to blacks, of course. Race defines white identity as well, not only in a negative and visible form of creating boundaries of separation to keep blacks out, but also in an affirmative sense that links notions of technology, cultural standards, residential patterns, behavioural patterns, and generally 'the Western way of life' to social and institutional arrangements. The formation of white identity (which has affinities with but is not identical to simple-minded racism) is crucial to the historical analysis of the rise and demise of apartheid; it continues to have great significance in the transformation of white social, cultural and political organisation in the post-apartheid era.[18]

The study of the meanings of race and their articulation in a political context should be combined with an understanding of their cultural and institutional dimensions. The efficacy of racial articulations is contingent on a context which makes some articulations more feasible and credible than others. To understand the ways in which racial meanings operate in the South African context it is necessary to study the emergence of racial concepts and their unfolding over time. Concretely, this means studying the interaction of colonial, settler and indigenous voices in the making of racial identity. While the former two have been heard through the analysis of official commissions and 'Native Affairs' departments,[19] the latter have scarcely been studied.[20] The reluctance to engage seriously with indigenous racial conceptualisations has been explained (away) in the past in light of the use made of racial classification by the apartheid regime. With the collapse of apartheid this excuse is no longer valid.[21] Viewed from a comparative angle this would entail examining South African racial articulations against the background of the African continent and its Diaspora. It is to this question that I now turn.

---

[17] An instructive perspective, in a different context, on how racial meanings are disseminated through cultural practices is G. Dent (ed), *Black Popular Culture*, a project by Michele Wallace (Seattle, 1992).

[18] Thus, we need to study white identity directly, perhaps along the lines suggested for the United States in A. Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: class politics and mass culture in nineteenth-century America* (London, 1990) and D. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: race and the making of the American working class* (London, 1991).

[19] See, for example, the work of S. Dubow, *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa, 1919-1936* (London, 1989) and A. Ashforth, *The Politics of Official Discourse in Twentieth Century South Africa* (Oxford, 1990).

[20] The most important exception is, of course, G. Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology* (Berkeley, 1978). See also G. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York, 1995).

[21] The impact of the rise of Black Consciousness in the early 1970s on the sense of urgency felt by progressive white academics to come up with alternative definitions of the South African struggle that would de-emphasize race (hence the rise of class analysis) is an interesting but entirely ignored topic. Paradoxically, it seems, it is at the hour of their greatest triumph that left-wing white academics are being forced yet again to tackle the demon of race they sought to have conclusively exorcised long ago.

3. Africa, Africanism, Afrocentrism

While the territories that form part of the continent of Africa have existed in their current location from time immemorial, the meaning of this location and the interconnections among its constituent elements and between them and adjacent regions have been transformed over the last centuries. The coherence of Africa as a unit is not an objective geographical fact that can be observed independently of the ways in which it is conceptualised by diverse actors. Rather, conceptualisations of Africa have been formed through the use of geographical realities to promote particular understandings of history - what Africa and regions within it were, are, and might become - and advocate policies based on these understandings.

It is problematic to project our present perceptions of Africa, a product of the colonial era and its aftermath, into the past. In the absence of evidence that the indigenous inhabitants of the continent perceived themselves as members of an African collective at any time before (and well into) that era, claims regarding the continued existence of an African-wide identity since ancient times should be treated with large measure of scepticism.[22] The vastness of the territory, the difficult terrain, the diversity of its population and the limited and unreliable nature of intra-continental transportation and communication networks (not only in the distant past but even today) make it unlikely that such identity could have emerged. Further, it has always been the case that the cultural and economic links of certain African regions with areas outside the continent, were as strong and sometime stronger than their links with regions inside African boundaries: Egypt and Middle East, North Africa and southern Europe, Ethiopia and Yemen, East Africa, Arabia and India. At the same time, the reality of cultural affinities and interconnections throughout the continent and (since the beginning of the colonial era) across the Atlantic Ocean in the African Diaspora, although diverse and uneven, cannot be denied.

Notions of Africa never have been, of course, a mere academic concern, in the framework of which the veracity of competing claims can be clearly established in relation to empirical evidence. This is the case not because such evidence is lacking but because it has been used for different and opposing political ends. The debate over Martin Bernal's book *Black Athena* and more broadly over the relations between ancient Egyptian and Greek civilisations is a case in point. Frequently referred to as the founding principle of Afrocentrism, but also in a different vein as a `Nilocentric' or `Egyptocentric' deviation from a proper Afrocentric approach, the notion that Greek philosophy and culture was copied or stolen from the ancient Egyptians has been around for quite some time.[23] In itself, the question of cultural dissemination in the ancient world seems unlikely to generate much popular interest; after all why should anyone care about the relations between two civilisations, both of which declined millennia ago, and neither one of which modern heirs inspires much excitement in the present. But of course `Greece' is not merely Greece but a proxy for the entire `Western Civilisation'. Likewise `Egypt' means much more than the country occupying the northeastern corner of Africa - it has come to stand for the heritage of the entire continent, and in particular its Sub-Saharan regions, and their Diasporic progeny. Little wonder then that the ensuing debate has been focused on the power relations between Euro-centred and Africa-centred paradigms, rather than on the substance of the book itself.

---

[22] A. Diop, *The African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Westport, 1974); M. Asante, *Afrocentricity* (New Jersey, 1988).

[23] M. Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Jersey, 1987); D. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington, 1994), pp. 1-45.

Black Athena erupted on a late 1980s American scene that in the previous two decades had seen a spectacular rise of intellectually subjugated voices, above all in the form of feminism, Afro-American and postcolonial studies.[24] What used to be unified scholarly fields became subject to interrogation that challenged their claims to represent objective knowledge. In the social sciences and humanities the idea that scholarship could or should be unaffected by social and political considerations had become deeply contested. While this contestation had a pure philosophical component, unrelated to contemporary concerns,[25] for the most part it was linked to the growing impact of identity politics. The ever-present explosive potential of racial conditions in the United States made it inevitable that a book attacking Eurocentric paradigms, even if in an area remote in time and space, should be incorporated into and evaluated in terms of debates over the meaning and role of multiculturalism, Afrocentrism and the relations between knowledge and power in American society. Some of the scholarly content of the book was lost as a result, though this was offset by the move into the public domain and beyond academic boundaries that frequently stifle creative thinking.[26] Another wave of engagement with Afrocentrism became evident in the 1990s with mounting right-wing attacks on so-called 'Political Correctness' (PC).[27] This took the shape of new publications denouncing Afrocentric texts as a travesty of real scholarship.[28] Most attention was focused again on the political implications of the scholarship in question.

While these debates have been marked by unique Afro-Diasporic concerns, their relevance extends beyond their origins, filtering back into Africa. Particularly in South Africa with its deep racial divisions, questions of intellectual domination and dependence, the significance of African national, racial and ethnic identities, the extent of academic Eurocentrism and what to do about it, and the relations between culture, power and knowledge, begin to occupy a more prominent place as the country is moving beyond apartheid. For the most part, however, these issues have been tackled only on the margins and outside the boundaries of the academia. The majority of workers in the field of

---

[24] See for example H. Baker, *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago, 1993), pp. 1-32.

[25] As could be argued about such work as P. Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason* (London, 1987).

[26] Given Bernal's own stated goal of lessening European cultural arrogance, the political use made of the book was natural. The prevailing intellectual climate probably would have ensured that anyway. The controversy marginalized issues with no obvious political relevance and highlighted others. Thus the 'Asiatic' component in the title, originally as important as the 'Afro' component, disappeared from the debate; conversely, Egypt's relations with the rest of Africa became a prominent issue in the public exchange although not discussed in the book itself.

[27] What used to be an in-house joke in left-wing academic and activist circles in the mid-1980s, had become by the early 1990s a household term as a result of an orchestrated conservative campaign. Beginning in 1990 a series of articles and books in the popular media portrayed a conspiracy to undermine the traditional values of American society (or Western Civilization as a whole). That the forces lumped together under the PC label never used the term themselves, and frequently were in conflict with supposed co-conspirators, mattered little. The goal was to contain and roll-back the intellectual gains made by all those who posed a challenge to established power arrangements in the academia as well as outside its boundaries.

[28] M. Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York, 1996); M. Lefkowitz and G. Rogers (eds), *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill, 1996). See the electronic Internet debate over the books between Bernal and Lefkowitz in May-June 1996.

South African studies are either unaware of such debates, on their global and local dimensions, or else uninterested in taking part in them. While a number of mostly black intellectuals have engaged to an extent with such issues, their contribution has been marginalized within mainstream circles, owing in large part to the threat felt by dominant white academics (particularly those of progressive political persuasions) of any open discussion of racial concerns, in which they are likely to be seen as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.[29]

To be fair, a critique of the absence of South African scholars from intellectual exchanges of this nature should also consider the extent to which these are liable to be framed in an exclusionary language that itself bolsters certain social and political interests. To put it bluntly, the evasions of race (and identity in general), and the use of the language of 'standards', 'quality' and 'excellence', can serve to retain academic privilege and resources in white hands; equally, though, the focus on race and the use of the language of 'empowerment', 'redress' and 'relevance' can serve to accumulate privilege and resources in elite black hands. Given that all concepts can be used and abused for such purposes the best course of action would *not* be to avoid them altogether, but rather to engage them critically in order to separate substance from posture and genuine moves towards a new system from self-serving rhetoric.

More intensive South African involvement in international attempts to challenge and produce alternatives to Eurocentrism (which may but do not have to include Afrocentric elements) would thus entail of necessity an intra-national struggle over academic power, resources and paradigms - a development that is likely to occupy our attention in coming years. The first step in this direction should be to pay more attention to work done in other circumstances which resonate with South African concerns. Currently, a South African scholar exploring new paradigms would typically be more familiar with, say, Foucault and Derrida than with black intellectuals as Cornel West and Stuart Hall, more familiar with scholars from the African Diaspora than with such African scholars as Valentin Mudimbe and Kwame Anthony Appiah, more familiar with the (metropolitan-based) latter than with those working in Africa itself. Using some hyperbole, the closer these scholars are to home, geographically and in terms of their substantive concerns, the less likely their work is to be familiar to and employed by local academics. The establishment of non-metropolitan links, with Africans as well as with those who face similar challenges in other parts of the world - Latin America, Middle east, South Asia - is thus a prime task. A South-South dialogue which does not involve a mandatory passage through the metropolis for purposes of academic legitimacy would be of great benefit to us all.

An example should suffice to illustrate the problem. In the last several years several collections addressing regional and South African concerns have been published by such bodies as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Senegal and by the Southern Africa Political Economy Series (SAPES) in Zimbabwe.[30] Virtually no white South African academics

---

[29] The highly publicized confrontations between Charles Van Onselen and William Makgoba of Wits University, and between Dennis Davis and Barney Pityana, in late 1995 and early 1996, raise fascinating issues regarding the relations of power and knowledge in the current South African racial conditions. Exchanges in mid-1996 on the pages of the *Higher Education Review* supplement of the Johannesburg *Sunday Independent* over the question of Africanisation in tertiary institutions are also of great interest. Unfortunately most issues of substance in these exchanges were sidelined by petty power politics and a generally dismissive attitude towards any deviations from what passes for respectable academic concerns.

[30] I. Shivji (ed), *State and Constitutionalism: an African Debate on Democracy* (Harare, 1991); P. Nyong'o (ed), *30 Years of Independence in Africa: The Lost Decades?* (Nairobi, 1992); E. Osaghae (ed), *Between State*

who work on such topics contribute to these publications and generally they pay little heed to what their African colleagues (inside and outside of the country) have to say. They not only talk past each other but seem barely aware of the existence of such non-metropolitan bodies of work. The only South African participation in these ventures seems to be that of academics from black universities,[31] enhancing the self-imposed isolation of mainstream scholars from the African environment. A strict division of labour in which theoretical technology is produced in the Euro-American core and empirical raw materials are supplied by the periphery is maintained; even the exchange of raw materials between peripheral regions is limited. This problem is not unique to adherents of any particular theoretical approach - it afflicts all of them equally, on their liberal, Marxist or postmodernist permutations. To counter this attitude we must 'move beyond forms of historical representation in which the energy driving the story originates in Europe, while African history (or Latin American) provides local color, a picturesque setting for the central drama.'[32]

The involvement of South African academics in the study of any African country other than their own has been minimal. A handful of papers and even books focusing on neighbouring countries have appeared in print, but there must be no more than a couple of local scholars whose main area of expertise is located outside the country, and virtually no one who works on broader African issues beyond the southern African region. Without wishing to play down the objective difficulties that face such an endeavour, the lack of academic interest in the African environment is shocking, especially as it tends to replicate in the scholarly domain the attitudes of superiority towards and dismissal of the African other that characterised apartheid politics.[33]

An intellectual move into Africa requires tackling questions of identity and culture in particular. Addressing African identity is not the same as addressing black racial identity, however, although these terms are frequently conflated. It is possible to develop a definition of Africa that takes as a point of departure continent-wide environmental, social and historical similarities irrespective of the colour, facial features and other physical properties, which are usually associated with the concept of race. From this perspective race would have nothing to do with the meaning of an African identity that remains open in principle to all those living on the continent who face similar political and economic challenges. This type of political Africanism is embodied in the structures of the Organisation of African Unity and other regional institutions as well. In a more radical vein it is to be found in the anti-colonial approaches associated with Frantz Fanon and his followers. An alternative definition would put greater emphasis on blackness as a critical aspect of African identity, not in necessarily in a

---

and Civil Society in Africa: Perspectives on Development (Dakar, 1994).

[31] G. Naidoo (ed), *Reform and Revolution: South Africa in the Nineties* (Dakar and Johannesburg, 1991); V. Maphai (ed), *South Africa: The Challenge of Change* (Harare, 1994); S. Buthelezi (ed), *South Africa: The Dynamics and Prospects of Transformation* (Harare, 1995).

[32] S. Feierman, 'African Histories and the Dissolution of World History', in *Africa and the Disciplines*, edited by R. Bates, V. Mudimbe and J. O'Barr (Chicago, 1993), p. 197. For a similar critique of theory which posits a hyper-real Europe as the universal subject of history see D. Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', *Representations*, 37 (Winter 1992), pp. 1-26.

[33] The anomalous nature of this state of affairs is apparent when one looks in a case such as Israel, which is subject to even sharper political isolation from its environment, and yet has produced dozens of academics who specialize in regional (Middle Eastern and African) affairs.

biological sense but in a sense that common origins (which tend to be associated with common physical features) are the basis for similar perceptions of the world and similar responses to natural and cultural challenges. The Negritude movement is an example of this approach, in its emphasis on the common cultural roots of Africans on the continent itself and in the Diaspora.[34] Contemporary Afrocentric schools of thought can be seen as adhering to the same approach though with many variations.

The approaches outlined above do not exhaust, of course, the ways in which Africanism can be defined. Although African countries find themselves today in a similar predicament to a large extent, all people of African origins share some even if loose cultural elements, and all blacks in Africa and elsewhere have been subject to racial discrimination in one form or another. The precise manner in which these factors combine to affect people's perceptions and activities in specific situations varies a great deal. This is not to say that the common African roots are not meaningful but rather that they are not the only significant factor in determining social action. Under what circumstances, in which ways, and in which spheres of action these roots matter, and what are their consequences for policy in different areas, are questions that need to be examined concretely; they have no ready-made answers.

4. State, Politics and Historical Legacies

One area which recently experienced growth in scholarly attention is the state in Africa. The great expectations of political emancipation of the 1960s had given rise by the 1970s to a sense of stagnation, which subsequently deepened into a general state of depression and dissolution. Not all African states followed the same trajectory, but the recurrence of devastating conflicts, civil wars, a huge debt burden and social dislocation across the continent facilitated a state of mind that became known as Afro-Pessimism. The 1990s have portrayed a somewhat different picture. A few bright examples appeared in this bleak landscape, most notably of course South Africa. Transitions to multi-party systems in other places such as Zambia, Kenya and Malawi, the cessation of armed conflicts in Angola and Mozambique, the liberation of Namibia and the blocking of moves towards a one-party state there and in Zimbabwe - all these have signified a vigorous process of democratisation. At the same time, elsewhere the situation has worsened to such an extent that violent chaos erupted in Zaire, Somalia, Burundi and above all Rwanda. These events have fuelled the surge of interest in the state.

Naturally enough, political analysis in South Africa during that period focused on the struggle against apartheid, the process of transition to democracy and the transformation of the state in the post-apartheid era. The extent to which political patterns in South Africa showed affinities with those in the rest of the continent has not been seriously explored. A long tradition of adherence to the notion of South African exceptionalism continued unabated, though mixed with occasional analogies with democratic transitions in such other parts of the world as Latin America and Eastern Europe. Without denying the obvious linkages between South African developments and those in neighbouring countries, the mainstream assumption has been that the unique features of settler rule, early industrialisation, massive urbanisation, and national economic unification posed political challenges and created political opportunities unlike those elsewhere on the continent. In particular, the existence of a vibrant civil society (above all in the form of militant union movement) that developed over the years of resistance to apartheid seemed to be capable of offsetting the tendencies to despotism and 'politics of

---

[34] V. Mudimbe (ed), *The Surreptitious Speech: Presence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987* (Chicago, 1992).

the belly[35] that have afflicted much of independent Africa.

The African heritage, however, goes much deeper than is usually allowed for. Not in the racist sense in which the demise of white control is equated with descent into chaos, but in the sense that the modern South African state has been marked by the legacy of European colonial and settler domination. Shaped by the imperatives of rule over the indigenous masses, themselves inspired by pre-colonial modes of organisation, specific forms of state politics came to the fore, elements of which persisted long after the collapse of colonialism. The features of the African colonial state, a result of the interaction between the distinct pattern of European overseas expansion in the late 19th century and indigenous state arrangements in large parts of the continent, make the examination of South Africa in the context of African political developments of great interest.[36]

In a far-reaching comparative study of colonial politics in Africa Crawford Young argues that the combination of distinct imperial legacies and indigenous traditions of rule made the African colonial state a political species with a singular historical personality.[37] Among the reasons for this distinctive character are the speed and might of the imperial assault, the ruthlessness of the extractive action, central to which was the forcing of rural people into the labour market, the autocratic yet paternalist mode of rule, the crucial role of race in the colonial project, and the relatively weak indigenous capacity to resist the cultural onslaught unleashed in the wake of conquest. None of these factors is entirely unique to Africa, but together they created a specific political trajectory that is still relevant today as 'a genetic code for the new states of Africa was already imprinted on its embryo within the womb of the African colonial state'.[38] This is expressed in particular in the 'lethal combination' of the colonial legacy, 'the failed vision of the integral state, and the prebendal realities of political management' - in other words authoritarianism, state assault on a weakened civil society, administrative inefficiency and corruption.[39]

One problem with Young's approach is that by focusing on the impact of colonial policies it unwittingly fails to recognise the capacity of indigenous societies to absorb and thereby shape and modify colonial challenges, rather than submit to or copy them wholesale. In other words, it posits an all-powerful colonial authority that little can stand in its path. A different way of looking at the relations between colonial and indigenous inputs is offered by Terence Ranger who in a self-critique of his previous notion of the invention of tradition suggests multiple imaginations of power in tension with each other, and a pluralism of voices 'before, during and after colonialism'.[40] Taking this approach as a starting point, we can conceptualise African politics today as a contested terrain in which elements of continuity

---

[35] For this see J.F. Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London, 1992).

[36] A topic pursued in M. Mamdani, *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996).

[37] C. Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, 1994).

[38] *ibid*, p. 283.

[39] *ibid*, p. 292.

[40] T. Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition Revisited', in *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-Century Africa*, edited by T. Ranger and O. Vaughan (Basingstoke, 1993), p. 80.

13

and change with the pre-colonial and colonial past, and multiple languages of power compete over legitimacy, authority and the allegiance of the masses.[41] Another way of looking at it is in terms of the task of reconciling the imperatives of representation and participation, democracy and communal association, in a context in which the legacy of a bifurcated colonial state with its sharp differentiation of the urban and the rural and their distinct modes of political organisation live on.[42]

To the extent that this is an accurate analysis of the legacy of the colonial state and the challenges currently facing the postcolonial state in Africa as a whole, how is it relevant to the case of South Africa? At both the analytical and practical-political and constitutional levels, models of liberal democratic rule have focused on individual rights and the creation of a political system in which all citizens stand in the same relation to the state, equally incorporated into the central structures of power. In this paradigm the historical heritage of the people and their political institutions make no difference to the desired outcome, which is invariably presented in universal terms. Notions of an African model of democracy have remained very vague. They rarely go beyond interesting-sounding rhetoric to present concrete ideas on how indigenous modes of political organisation could be drawn upon to make political participation more meaningful.

Needless to say, such modes of rule have been used extensively in South Africa in the name of tradition and custom - and frequently in a manner that robbed them of much of their original meaning and appeal - to bolster colonial control in collaboration with indigenous elites. In the rural areas today (and not only in the obvious example of Kwazulu-Natal), significant vestiges of such modes of organisation are still alive although increasingly marginalized by the rise of democratic mass politics. The challenge facing us in this respect is to explore to what extent there is more to these non-modern manifestations than the obsolete relics of a discredited past. To be clear on this point, this is not a call to return to Tribalism, nor is it an endorsement of supposedly authentic IFP-style politics as a model for the rest of the country. Rather it is an argument for the need to find creative ways of reconciling the past and the present and constructing a future that is firmly grounded in the historical legacies of the people concerned. The limitations of representative democracy as a mechanism to facilitate popular participation make the search for ways to augment and deepen it (but by no means replace it altogether) an exciting propsect.

Scholarship oriented towards the African experience can play a role in this task. It can examine alternative models of rural political organisation that were developed in such countries as Uganda or Ghana, not to adopt them uncritically but with a view to learn from the different ways in which the unique history of the state in Africa can be brought to bear to on contemporary arrangements. There is nothing objectionable about the European political heritage in itself, nor is there anything magical about the African heritage. Both can offer valuable lessons. So far scholarship has focused on the former. It is time more attention is paid to the latter.

---

[41] In a similar vein see W. Munro, 'Power, Peasants and Political Development: Reconsidering State Construction in Africa', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1996), pp. 112-148.

[42] Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*.

5. Culture, Identity and Power

Directing our attention towards the African experience means beginning to engage with the vast exchange on African identity and culture that has developed in other contexts, as a topic of study but also as a pool of ideas on how the legacies of the past can be harnessed to serve present social concerns and imagine a better future. African intellectuals such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, to mention a few prominent names, have contributed elaborate discussions of these issues, from which South African academics have mostly kept their distance.[43] While actual participation in these debates has faced obvious obstacles of politics - the isolation imposed by apartheid - and race, scholarly engagement with them is long overdue. It is with a call for such engagement that I wish to conclude this paper.

On a more analytical note, an engagement with the ways people relate to their own identities and cultures can enhance our understanding of how power is imagined and organised in the specific African context. South African politics in the 1990s can illustrate the point. Notions of nationhood, race and cultural identity have been competing for popular support. Far from being mere manipulation or reflection of different political interests, the contestation over meanings has served to define and consolidate these very interests. Thus, for example, the National Party, by putting forward an implicit (sometimes explicit) definition of nationhood based on social stability, Christianity and civilised standards, has given rise to a new political community with distinct racial characteristics - comprising of whites and coloured people. This racial articulation has not taken place in a social void, of course; it has been linked to material concerns over housing, jobs and security. The crucial point, however, is that it would not have been possible without a clear shift in racial meanings - dismantling notions of blackness which lumped coloureds together with Africans, and constructing a new racial notion defined negatively (uniting all non-Africans) rather than positively.

A different racial articulation has been attempted by the African National Congress which, true to the contradiction contained in its own name, has sought to retain a focus on African identity while simultaneously claiming the leading role in South African nation building. This strategy had been pursued even before the ANC was unbanned and it was reinforced during the period of negotiations leading to the April 1994 elections, and in its aftermath. Without neglecting (but also without highlighting) the specific sense of African identity, the ANC has managed to articulate it with a sense of nationhood in which Africans are seen as prominent members whose role has finally been given recognition. The ANC has thus simultaneously projected racial and non-racial images, seeking to appeal to different constituencies. The success of this project has been uneven. It enjoyed overwhelming support among Africans in the national and provincial elections, capturing over 90% of their votes in all parts of the country except for Kwazulu-Natal. It did not succeed in projecting a convincing non-racial image among other elements in the population, though perhaps it has served to facilitate an acceptance of democracy among non-Africans which would not have been possible had a more undiluted African racial image prevailed.

The success of these racial articulations can be appreciated when set against the failure of the competing racial images projected by the PAC and AZAPO. In these latter cases no wider articulation

---

[43] Notable exceptions of engagement of these issues from a South African perspective see E. Mphahlele, *The African Image* (London, 1974), especially the discussion of Negritude, pp. 79-95, and N. Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Johannesburg, 1991).

beyond race (African and Black respectively) was pursued, rendering the image one-dimensional and largely unappealing. The electoral fortunes of political parties, however, are not a simple reflection of the power of the racial images they project. Africanism and Black Consciousness cannot be reduced to the parties speaking on their behalf. The articulation of racial and non-racial meanings in ANC policy and practice implies that certain, more racially explicit, elements could be extracted from it and used in a new articulation. Such an articulation would capitalise on the resilient power of race as a social and cultural signifier resonating with deeply felt popular concerns. To be successful, however, it would have to combine racial and ostensibly non-racial appeals, though in a different way than is currently pursued by the ANC. From this perspective, then, the news of the death of racial politics are premature.

Racial meanings are frequently articulated with another type of identity, that of ethnicity. In South African studies ethnicity has been examined more readily than race, but usually from a perspective that focuses on the political manipulations and usages of the identity in question, rather than on the ways in which it becomes a constituent element of action by making sense of people's life. Ethnicity is politically manipulated, no doubt, but it cannot be reduced to attempts by local and foreign elites to defend their interests and sustain their power. Like race, it is a terrain on which identities are constructed in a process of contestation over meanings. To understand how it emerges and operates we need to explore the ways in which it produces and regulates popular experiences. Ethnicity makes experiences intelligible to members of the groups concerned, as well as to outsiders, and can thus be used to facilitate political mobilisation.

The discussion of questions of race and ethnicity in the South African context can benefit from systematic exploration of their operation in other similar contexts - in Africa and the African Diaspora. Comparisons are always beneficial in allowing a look at specific cases from a broader perspective. It is the argument of this paper that the Pan-African context will prove particularly useful in future comparative work.