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## TRENDS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

### WHITE SUPREMACY

The system of *apartheid* in modern South Africa is in large measure camouflage for the maintainance of white supremacy. In the first place it entails the division of the South African population into what are euphemistically known as 'national groups', which in practice come down to racial segments: white, the so-called 'coloured' - those of mixed race, and the descendants of the Cape colony's slaves - Indians and the Blacks. The last group, the indigeneous inhabitants of most of the land area of South Africa, form a vast majority of the country's population, but, with the so-called 'coloureds' and the Indians, have been systematically excluded from any real share in political and economic power. The official policy has stressed that what is intended is the creation of separate *zuilen*, or pillars of society. According to the ideology, South Africa is now a plural society, to such an extent that the title of the ministry formerly known as 'Bantu Affairs' is now 'Plural Affairs'. In hard reality, there is *geen spraak* - no question - of equality between the various groups, but rather a rigourously maintained hierarchy. The whites are vastly more prosperous and control almost all sectors of the economy, through their exclusion of other races from the processes of political decision making. The Blacks, including the Indians and the so-called 'coloureds', are rigidly circumscribed in their rights, for instance in where they can live, and are overwhelmingly forced into a position where the only escape from starvation is as labourers within the white dominated economy. Given the current depression, even this is denied to enormous numbers of them.

This system notoriously entails a massive degree of racial discrimination. By most criteria, South Africa is now the country in which the level of such discrimination is the highest in the world. Nevertheless, it was not always so. In his book, George Frederickson, a well-known American historian who has hitherto written largely on the ra-

cial problems of his own country, has attempted a full-scale historical comparison of the phenomenon of white supremacy in the United States and South Africa*. His main conclusion can perhaps best be illustrated by means of an imaginary graph. Were it possible to construct a single measure of racial discrimination - and that would be an exceedingly difficult undertaking for such a contextual concept -, then the result could be plotted against time for each of the two countries. It is fairly clear what the resulting graph would look like. Obviously, for neither country would the line be a simple curve, but would show all sorts of ups and downs. More importantly, the two curves would not run parallel to each other. Rather, at a given moment, sometime during the first third of the twentieth century, the two lines would cross each other. For then, in North America, racial discrimination was markedly more severe than in South Africa. Since then, it has clearly decreased in the USA, even though it far from disappeared entirely, while in South Africa it has only become more rigid and more all-embracing.

It should not be thought that history of the two countries is essentially incomparable. In both areas colonies were founded from north-west European protestant countries at approximately the same time. Both colonies made extensive use of slave labour. In both lands there was an indigenous population - admittedly much greater and more resilient in Africa than in America. In both America and South Africa slavery was abolished during the course of the nineteenth century, and both countries experienced an industrial revolution during the course of the nineteenth century, for all that the American variant was rather earlier and far more complete. Rather it is in the nature of the slave society, in the nature of the contacts with the Indigeneous peoples, in the nature of industrialization, that the explanation must be sought for the differing courses that race relations have taken.

To begin with the system of slavery, it is evidently impossible to claim that, for the slaves, one country was more or less discriminatory than the other. Slavery, everywhere, is the apogee of discrimination and oppression, in theory and often in practice. In both the USA and South

Africa the experience of enslaving blacks had long-lasting effects, convincing many whites of the necessity and justness of maintaining a hierarchical racial order. But the difference lay in the treatment of those blacks who were *not* slaves. Ironically in view of modern legislation there was considerable possibility for intermarriage between whites and blacks in the first two centuries of colonial South African history. Indeed it is debatable whether the concepts 'white' and 'black' can even be applied to South Africa before the middle of the nineteenth century. Certainly the racial taxonomy was by no means as sharp as it was in contemporary America, or is now in South Africa. In a way that would have been unthinkable in the southern United States, over the generations upward social mobility was clearly possible in the Cape Colony, no matter what the racial origins of the individuals concerned.

Rather it was in the process of subduing the indigeneous peoples and in the process of industrialisation that there developed the harshness of modern South African race relations, as compared to those of the United States. Sheer numbers are vital here. Whereas the white immigrants and their descendants, whether slave or free, make up no more than about a quarter of the modern South African population, they are the overwhelming majority in the U.S.A. Moreover in only a few areas of the southern states did slaves or other blacks make up over half the population. For this reason, the colonization of North America and the establishment of a European-controlled society entailed taking land from the Amerindians, but not forcing them to work for the invaders. In South Africa the conquerors required both the land and the labour of the Africans.

The process whereby virtually all the indigeneous Africans were reduced to a position where they are dependent on the white-run economy was the most crucial of modern South African history, although Frederickson's handling of it is the least satisfactory part of his book, probably because it has least in common with developments in North America. It began very early in the Cape Colony's history. From at least the beginning of the eighteenth century, autochthonous Africans were forced in ever-increasing numbers to labour on the sheep and cattle farms of the South

African interior. Initially they were not so vital to the working of the colonial economy because its labour force could be maintained and built up by the importation of slaves.

After the beginning of the nineteenth century, the use of African labour became slowly more and more crucial for the colonial rural economy. By around 1830, virtually all the Khoisan ('Hottentots') living within the borders of the colony were forced to work for the whites. As the nineteenth century wore on, growing numbers of Black Africans, from that group that has always made up the great majority of the South African population, were forced into similar positions, as their land came under white control and they had no option but to become labour tenants for white farmers. This entailed that they might retain a certain amount of ground to grow crops and might run a number of stock on the farms, but in return were tied to a labour force. Even this became steadily more precarious as the intensification of agriculture has made white farmers want to dispose of even these small plots, and to use a labour force working entirely for wages, which are kept artificially low by the operation of state power.

This was a process that began early. It can be argued that the arrangements for controlling African (mainly Khoikhoi) labourers were transferred to the slaves after their official emancipation. As a result, the slave-owners were able to maintain their hold over their ex-slaves so that there was no major break in the patterns of labour repression. Ex-slaves continued to work the farms of the Cape under almost the same conditions as they had before. There was no need for the combination of share-cropping and lynch law which maintained white supremacy in the American South, following the American Civil War and Reconstruction Period.

Equally, this pattern was maintained after the mining revolution that led to the rapid capitalist industrialisation of South Africa. Even though, as Stanley B. Greenberg has pointed out, in principle 'Capitalism is color-blind', in practice the pre-existence of a system of labour repression, and of a governmental apparatus to back this up, allowed capitalists to drive down the wages of the great

majority of the employees. The South African system of *trekarbeiders* - migrant labourers - (from within and without South Africa's territorial boundaries) and of legally separated labour markets, has not only been to the advantage of priviledged employees, the 'white working class'. It has also enabled the employers to keep down their total wage bill, a measure of great importance especially in the gold mining industry where its size was vital to profitability since producers had little or no influence over the price their product could fetch.

Once again the contrast with the USA is clear. There the blacks were far too few for them to form the basis of the industrial labour force. As a result, when they did manage to escape from the agricultural economy of the South, they could eventually be incorporated into the northern labour force, and ultimately into integrated unions. The employers had no incentive to exclude them, but rather could employ them as blacklegs to break strikes. Initially this led to vicious race riots between white workers and black strikebreakers, as in St. Louis in 1917 and Chicago in 1919. Eventually the unions saw that they had no option but to admit blacks, and to organise them against the employers. Prejudice and discrimination on a personal level have clearly continued to exist, and to curtail the upward social mobility of the American blacks. Barriers in terms of access to education and to political office were long maintained, though never fully institutionalised. But outside the South, there was never any chance of a strict racial segregation within the economic system - and even in the South it disappeared as that region became industrialised in its turn.

Behind this contrast, there was a major difference in the degree of state power. In America, there was a long tradition of non-interference by the government in the working of the 'free market'. Discrimination in the United States typically existed not because the government willed it, but because it refused to act against it. When it did act, whether at state or at federal level, it was forced by the constitutional amendment that abolished slavery to take measures against racial discrimination.

In South Africa, the tradition of state interference in

the economy has been very much greater. From a succession of laws passed in the years after the establishment of the Union in 1910, of which the Native Lands Act is the most famous, through the Herzog bills of the 1920s (which legalized the job colour bar in the mines) to the legislation that since 1948 has established the modern system of *apartheid*, South African race relations have been regulated by the State. Matters of land ownership, residence, access to employment and voting rights are merely a few of the fields in which government has taken measures to disadvantage of blacks. Conversely, direct state involvement in the economy, through the nationalised railways, the iron and steel industry, and the electricity business has been used to maintain the position of white labour. To a degree which would cause many American businessmen to suspect communist influence, the South African government regulates all aspects of the economy and society.

George Frederickson's work, then, is largely concerned with identifying the dissimilarities in the histories of South Africa and the United States, or rather those which were crucial for the development of their socio-racial structures. In so doing, he tends to shift his units of analysis. Sometimes his discussion is about the American South, or the Cape Colony (since 1910 the Cape Province) elsewhere about the United States as a whole, or the total Republic of South Africa. This is necessary, since otherwise his narratives, which tend to remain at a relatively low level of abstraction, would be so distant from each other that meaningful comparison would be impossible. Moreover this method allows him to point out elements in the social structure of the two countries that have often been taken for granted by historians - and indeed by those who have lived those histories - but which nevertheless have been of decisive influence in the making of those two countries. The role of the government in the organisation of society is perhaps the most important of these, but there are others, for instance his penetrating discussion of the Jim Crow laws and the so-called 'petty *apartheid*'. In both cases these were measures which restricted blacks' access to large numbers of public services. In America they were crucial, but in South Africa they

are little more than a froth on the surface of 'grand' *apartheid*. They can be removed without the structure of society being deeply affected - something American political activists with their own experience in mind tend to forget when looking at South Africa.

Frederickson, in this book has undertaken an experiment in controlled historical cross-fertilization. The results of this experiment, within its own terms, can only be described as successful. Admittedly there is little or nothing that is new to specialists in the history of either country, at least at the level of facts. But that was not his intention. By concentrating on the contrasts between the two experiences, he has shown how the controlled use of comparison can provide a light source which illuminates the past from another, often most revealing, angle.

Nevertheless, the illumination remains limited to the history, and present situation, of the two countries themselves. Frederickson has eschewed generalisation on the conditions under which the hierarchical ordering of (putative) racial groups can come into being, or be broken down. Although careful and considered reading of this book would be essential for whoever attempts that task, no such theory is to be found within it. Wisely or not, Frederickson has left such high level theorising to others.

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* George M. Frederickson, *White Supremacy, A Comparative Study in American and South African History*, Oxford 1981.