

## SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

### South African History and Subaltern Historiography: Ideas for a Radical History of White Folk\*

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**ABSTRACT:** In considering how “radical” histories of ordinary whites under apartheid might be written, this essay engages with several traditions of historical scholarship “from” and “of” below. For three decades, Marxist-inspired social history dominated radical historiography in South Africa. It has, however, proved little able to nurture historiography of whites that is politically engaged and acknowledges post-Marxist currents in the discipline. I advocate a return to theory and suggest that new sources may be drawn from the academy and beyond. Historiographies “of” below need not necessarily be historiographies “from” below and this article proposes the idea of a “racial state” as an alternative starting point for a history of apartheid-era whites. It goes on to argue that Subaltern Studies, as a dissident, theoretically eclectic and interdisciplinary current in historiography offers useful perspectives for exploring the everyday lives of whites in South Africa. After suggesting a research agenda stemming from these theoretical and comparative insights, I conclude by reflecting on the ethics of writing histories of apartheid-era whites.

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Historians know remarkably little about the lives of white people in twentieth-century South Africa, or how they reproduced, maintained, and negotiated successive racial regimes. There is a large and diverse historiography on the effects of colonialism, segregation, and apartheid on black people. However, similar intensity and rigour has not been brought to the everyday histories of whites. Moreover, knowledge is scantiest for the period from the advent of the apartheid state in 1948. The main aim of this

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essay is thus to investigate how to approach the task of writing “new” social histories of apartheid-era whites, especially of those described in some historiographic traditions as “working class”, of whites who broke their way into the “middle class”, of those separated from the mainstream of *oordenlike* (respectable) white society, as well as of those who were plainly destitute.

Why, then, when history is full of lacunae, whites? To Frederick Cooper’s generation educated in American universities during the late 1960s and steeped in the “Ibadan School”,<sup>1</sup> pre-colonial history or resistance to colonialism constituted genuine African history, while a focus on the colonial state or society risked the label of a “throwback to imperial history”.<sup>2</sup> Terence Ranger made a similar point in 1978, detecting uneasiness that studies of whites might mark a return to “historiographic colonialism”.<sup>3</sup> From today’s point of view, however, this once apparently esoteric interest in histories of whites has value. Postcolonial studies, interested in the often paradoxical continuities between the colonial and postcolonial, has considerably reduced squeamishness of the sort observed by Cooper and Ranger.<sup>4</sup> The point, however, is to acknowledge that whites were not homogenous, were historical agents in their own right, and could be part of a postcolonial African history (and, in the case of South Africa, post-apartheid history); beyond that, there are compelling historiographic reasons for including them. As Ann Stoler and Cooper have argued, in identifying and interpreting non-western reactions to political and economic dominance, historians and anthropologists have tended to overestimate the coherence of the colonial state, neglecting its tense, ambiguous, and contested internal topographies.<sup>5</sup> For these authors, failure to carefully scrutinize the complexities of colonial power is a significant omission that hampers the understanding of colonial and postcolonial African histories.

Such arguments also apply to the history of South Africa under apartheid. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was vigorous enquiry into the lives and experiences of black South Africans,<sup>6</sup> but there was no equivalent attention

1. For a survey on the Ibadan School see: Joseph Ki-Zerbo, “General Introduction”, in Joseph Ki-Zerbo (ed.), *General History of Africa (I. Methodology and African Prehistory)* (Paris [etc.], 1981), pp. 1–23.

2. Frederick Cooper, “Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History”, *The American Historical Review*, 99 (December 1994), pp. 1516–1545, 1522.

3. Terence Ranger, “White Presence and Power in Africa”, *Journal of African History*, 29 (1979), pp. 463–469.

4. For a good overview of postcolonial studies and their relationship to African studies, see Rita Abrahamsen, “African Studies and the Postcolonial Challenge”, *African Affairs*, 102 (2003), pp. 189–210.

5. Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda”, in Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler (eds), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA [etc.], 1997), pp. 1–58, 5–7.

6. Scholars interested in these histories were organized loosely around the Wits History Workshop (named after its venue at the University of the Witwatersrand), discussed below.

to whites.<sup>7</sup> One task in providing a more substantial account of those groups of whites identified above is to understand more generally how white society under apartheid was organized, its fault lines and contradictions, and the extent to which it cohered around certain taken-for-granted ideas. This entails more comprehensive knowledge of the ideologies that legitimized and reproduced apartheid, of how the state that privileged whites also disciplined and regulated them (while they were themselves often agents of a highly authoritarian bureaucracy), as well as of the ethnography of whites. I will argue that Subaltern Studies, a perspective that had its starting point in India in the 1980s in a Marxism-inspired historiography “of below” venturing into new theoretical and methodological terrains, represents a useful theoretical and methodological entry point into this history, albeit not without its problems (discussed more substantially below).

Research efforts founded on these questions may speak to African historiography more generally. The late 1990s saw growing interest in the postcolonial African state; yet, the nationalist movements in power, which have marked so many of these states, were seldom examined critically: as Miles Larmer notes, they tended to be seen in ahistorical “normative” terms.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, there was a lack of comparative endeavours, including attempts to compare dissimilar “nationalist movements”, like those of liberation nationalists with those of white settlers. In 1948, the National Party (NP) came to power in South Africa, a force which saw itself as determined defender of Afrikaner Nationalism. How histories of African nationalist movements in power may be read against those in South Africa, black and white, has never been seriously explored.<sup>9</sup> The study of whites during apartheid leads inevitably to what happens when nationalist movements occupy power, how party and state were integrated, and the extent to which the population, or sections of it, were incorporated into, and disciplined by the movement and then the ensuing state. Such questions historicize and problematize nationalist movements, transformed into post-independence ruling parties.

There may also be political and pedagogic value in an expressly “radical” history of whites situated within a broader African historiography and with

7. In my doctoral thesis I discuss the reasons for this. See Neil Roos, “From War to Workplace: Race, Class and Gender among White South African Servicemen, 1939–1953” (Ph.D., University of North West, 2001), pp. 12–14.

8. Miles Larmer, *Rethinking African Politics: A History of Opposition in Zambia* (Aldershot, 2011), pp. 1–20.

9. Ran Greenstein, “Identity, Race, History: South Africa and the Pan-African Context”, in *idem* (ed.), *Comparative Perspectives on South Africa* (Basingstoke [etc.], 1998), pp. 1–32, 15. In a post-colonial intellectual climate open to awkward historical continuities, comparisons, and similarities, apartheid South Africa can be a useful comparative lens for African studies, not only in relation to nationalist movements in power, but also as a derivative form of the African colonial state. For the latter see: Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), pp. 32, 102.

whiteness a central historical, political, and ethical problem. The notion of “radical” as a stance in historiography is, of course, intricate and has varying meanings according to place and time. In many contexts worldwide it has meant some affiliation with Marxism (which, again, is a very diverse phenomenon). The same has been true for South African intellectual circles where “radical history” for a long time implied both historical analysis and a political vision inspired by a specific adoption of a Marxism that emerged in the 1970s in critical dissidence towards older orthodoxies.<sup>10</sup> As historian Geoff Eley points out, however, “radical history” does not necessarily have to be equated with Marxist approaches. For Eley, an open definition of “radical history” primarily involves linking scholarly practice to a contemporary politics of social change.<sup>11</sup>

The notion of “race” is similarly ridden with complexity. As Robert Young insists, any history that claims to be “postcolonial” must be grounded in analyses of the historical and contemporary effects of colonialism – including racism.<sup>12</sup> White people, particularly Afrikaans-speakers, were and are besieged by scholarly and popular Afrikaner nationalist narratives targeted to inspire, mobilize, and remove doubt, scripting them as sturdy, steadfast, and diligent, and sometimes as “victims” of post-apartheid political, economic, and cultural transformations. These accounts approximate Leonard Thompson’s “political mythologies of Afrikaner nationalism”.<sup>13</sup> To Jonathan Jansen, these historical narratives and their contemporary corollaries contribute to “bitter [racial] knowledge [...] learned reliably in closed circles of influence through parents, teachers, coaches, peers and *dominees* [ministers, usually of Dutch Reformed Churches]” and passed down the generations.<sup>14</sup>

I will explore the extent to which a historiography that transcends the analytic boundaries of the specific blend of Marxism that crystallized in South African social history in the 1970s and 1980s can still be “radical”. I will then suggest that if there is to be a new radical history of whites under apartheid it should repudiate the idea, common in some sociologically inclined whiteness studies, of “whiteness” as a category in and of itself. Instead, it ought to reveal how whites during apartheid were, in turn, products of complex histories of power, privilege, incorporation, and

10. Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius, “Editors’ Introduction: Radical History and South African Society”, *Radical History Review*, 46–47 (1990), pp. 13–45, 31.

11. Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005), pp. xii–xiii.

12. Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford [etc.], 2001), p. 180.

13. See Leonard Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (New Haven, CT [etc.], 1985), in which he identifies and analyses myths organizing and perpetuating twentieth-century Afrikaner nationalism.

14. Jonathan Jansen, *Knowledge in the Blood: Confronting Race and the Apartheid Past* (Stanford, CA, 2008), pp. 114–143, esp. 114–116.

exclusion thus demonstrating how apartheid society has been constructed historically (including a measured degree of contingency). I will propose some directions for a historiography of these “non-elite” whites by considering approaches of comparative historiography, appropriate angles of investigation, and the most fruitful methodologies to utilize. I argue that South African historiography has tended to disregard the ideological, cultural, and disciplinary construction of whiteness, and often treated whites as monolithic – most notably, as either “Afrikaners” or “English-speakers”. This relates partly to the lack of systematic ongoing theoretical engagement of South African social history with more recent conceptual debates in historiography. I will propose a “new” history of whites, shaped by some of the achievements of Subaltern Studies, but retaining South African social history’s abiding strengths, especially its attention to class and relations of production, its methodological vitality, and self-conscious insurgency. Finally, I will address some of the ethical, political, and pedagogic implications of attempting such a history.

#### ORDINARY WHITES IN SOUTH AFRICANA

Much has been written on whites, but it has never cohered as a major focus within South African history. History-writing in South Africa has often been highly charged politically, and, at times, prevailing ideological and political concerns have prompted some historians to concentrate on whites, usually with particular intellectual or political aims, while other historians have neglected this group almost entirely. The diversity of South African historical writing, and the density of scholarship on whites, makes the task of a comprehensive literature survey difficult. I will try, however, to identify how ordinary white people are depicted in some major South African historical traditions, teasing out some of the unevenness and excessive generalization that characterizes their treatment by historians.<sup>15</sup>

As white Afrikaners were drawn into the economy of industrializing South Africa during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, their social, political, and economic struggles attracted the attention of the local intelligentsia.<sup>16</sup> Studies motivated by political, social, and moral concern for

15. The attribute “ordinary” is, admittedly, rather elusive. In using it, I follow Hans Medick, one of the proponents of *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life), which arose in Germany in the 1980s, and who invokes “ordinariness” as distinguished from “high” politics. See Hans Medick, “Missionaries in the Row Boat? Ethnological Ways of Knowing as a Challenge to Social History”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29 (1987), pp. 76–98.

16. Colin Bundy insightfully analyses how poor whites became a “problem” in “Vagabond Hollanders and Runaway Englishmen: White Poverty in the Cape Before Poor Whiteism”, in William Beinart, Peter Delius, and Stanley Trapido (eds), *Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa, 1850–1930* (Johannesburg, 1987), pp. 101–128, 120.

newly urbanized, often unemployed “poor white” Afrikaners were undertaken by clergymen and scholars close to the Dutch Reformed Church. Poor whites, at the same time, threatened the stability and logic of segregated society. In the early 1930s, *Dominee* J.R. Albertyn articulated these anxieties, warning: “If the more privileged European grudges and refuses the poor his patronage, the latter will associate with non-Europeans if he finds no member of his own race to consort with.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most significant study in this genre is the Carnegie Commission of Inquiry.<sup>18</sup> This literature reveals contemporary reactions to the economic and psychological conditions of poor whites, and illustrates how South Africa’s rough-edged capitalist development shaped the fears, and intellectual and ideological agendas, of white elites.<sup>19</sup> Although poverty never disappeared completely, large sections of the white population became increasingly prosperous from the mid-1920s as governments extended economic protection to white workers and farmers, and welfare to all whites. By World War II “poor whiteism” had subsided as a moral, cultural, and political problem for the state, churches, and press, and it also slipped from the gaze of contemporary scholars. Following these intellectuals, later historians seldom attempted to track over time and generations those disparaged as a “problem” earlier in the century, while Afrikaner historians writing between the two World Wars were more interested in the Great Trek and the Second Anglo-Boer War, tending to concentrate on political and military leaders, and portraying Afrikaners as monolithic.<sup>20</sup>

The most substantial historical studies of the white poor came from W.M. Macmillan and C.W. de Kiewiet. Writing initially during the First World War, Macmillan drew heavily on economics and sociology to examine links between the mineral revolution, rural dispossession, and white urbanization. He described how the transition to capitalism devastated the lives of the rural poor, emphasizing the impossibility of separating the study of the white from the black poor. He argued that the economic relations underpinning everyday lives, not political history, were the crucial fields upon which to focus.<sup>21</sup>

17. J.R. Albertyn, *The Poor White and Society* (Stellenbosch, 1932), p. 106.

18. *Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa* (Stellenbosch, 1932). Funded by the Carnegie Corporation, the Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa undertook its investigations between 1929 and 1932. It released its reports in 1932, covering the economic, psychological, educational, health, and sociological dimensions of the “poor white” phenomenon.

19. Apart from the interventions mentioned, see, for instance J.R. Albertyn, *Die Stadwaartse Trek van die Afrikanernasie* (Johannesburg, 1947); G.D. Scholtz, *Het die Afrikaanse Volk ’n Toekoms?* (Johannesburg, 1954).

20. Ken Smith, *The Changing Past: Trends in South African Historical Writing* (Athens, OH, 1988), pp. 86–88.

21. W.M. Macmillan, *The South African Agrarian Problem and its Historical Development* (Johannesburg, 1919); W.M. Macmillan, *Complex South Africa – An Economic Footnote to History*

De Kiewiet elucidated the structural and cultural factors inhibiting success of rural Afrikaners in cities and towns, who assumed they were entitled to the material and social privileges of whiteness, but could not afford a “white” urban lifestyle. Lacking the necessary economic and cultural means, they were largely limited to unskilled manual jobs, which, for the white poor, were synonymous with degrading “kaffir work”.<sup>22</sup> As a Marxist historiography of South Africa emerged in the early 1970s, it developed, in some respects, against so-called liberal scholarship. Macmillan and De Kiewiet were sidelined, and, despite their empirical richness and analytical sophistication, historians these days seldom cite their works on early twentieth-century South Africa.

From the 1930s, with the publication of Ian Douglas MacCrone’s *Race Attitudes in South Africa*,<sup>23</sup> whites, particularly Afrikaners, featured in the scholarship of a small group of liberal white historians, psychologists, and economists interested in the causes of increasingly entrenched and institutionalized segregation. Their major argument, which became known as the “frontier thesis”,<sup>24</sup> was that racism was an anachronism stemming from Afrikaner interaction and conflict with African societies on the frontiers in the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries.<sup>25</sup> This “irrational heritage”<sup>26</sup> was inappropriate for a modern industrial state and the liberals’ hope was that economic growth, understood as colour blind, would erode segregation.

Poor whites featured prominently in liberals’ explanations of everyday racism and segregation. The apogee of this scholarly tradition was the publication in 1971 of the second volume of the *Oxford History of South Africa*, particularly two chapters that dealt substantially with ordinary whites.<sup>27</sup> As a critic indicated already at the time, the authors tended to “filter out many of the very real complexities [...] through a liberal moral screen”<sup>28</sup> and like the liberal school generally, were “didactic and oversimplified”.<sup>29</sup>

(London, 1930). See also Jeremy Krikler, “William Macmillan and the Working Class”, paper presented to “The Making of Class”, University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, 9–14 February 1987.

22. C.W. de Kiewiet, *A History Of South Africa Social & Economic* (Oxford, 1941), p. 216.

23. I.D. MacCrone, *Race Attitudes in South Africa: Historical, Experimental and Psychological Studies* (London, 1937).

24. This applied Frederick Turner’s thesis to a South African context. See Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, NY, 1935).

25. Harrison Wright, *The Burden of the Present: The Liberal-Radical Controversy in Southern African History* (Cape Town [etc.], 1977), pp. 8–13; Smith, *The Changing Past*, p. 136.

26. A labelling that Smith, *The Changing Past*, p. 136, attributes to the historian Shula Marks.

27. David Welsh, “The Growth of Towns” and Rene De Villiers, “Afrikaner Nationalism”, in Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson (eds), *The Oxford History of South Africa, Volume II* (Oxford, 1978), respectively pp. 172–243; 365–423.

28. Wright, *The Burden of the Present*, p. 54.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

By the early 1970s, a wave of scholars inspired by Marxist theories began to make inroads into the South African academy.<sup>30</sup> Influenced by major currents of Marxism in Western Europe at the time, especially the work of Althusser and Poulantzas, their approach was highly structuralist.<sup>31</sup> Writing at a time when worker organization in South Africa was at a low point, and the bastions of white capitalist hegemony seemed impregnable, it seemed imperative for these radicals to examine the precise forms of white dominance. Scholars like Rob Davies, David Kaplan, Mike Morris, and Dan O'Meara were thus concerned, above all, with the development of racial capitalism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century South Africa.<sup>32</sup> While some of this cohort did focus on white workers, their top-down theoretical approach meant that their interest was generally limited to highlighting the privileged role of white workers within a racist set of productive relations, and a segregated state.<sup>33</sup>

By the late 1980s, this structuralist iteration of Marxism had been displaced by another kind of Marxist-inclined social history, inspired by British and North American Marxist historians like E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Eugene Genovese, which became synonymous with the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand, commonly known as the "Wits History Workshop".<sup>34</sup> As Dan O'Meara – himself from an earlier cohort of South African Marxists, most of whom worked

30. Radical thinking in South Africa has its own, complicated and long trajectory. For instance, important strands of radical thinking associated with the South African Communist Party had roots in the Eastern European socialism that many Jewish immigrants brought to South Africa from the early twentieth century onwards. Bozzolo and Delius, "Editors' Introduction", p. 14.

31. See, for example, Frederick Johnstone, "Class Conflict and Colour Bars in the South African Gold-mining Industry, 1910–1926", ICS seminar paper, 1970; Martin Legassick, "The Making of South African 'Native Policy' 1903–1923", ICS seminar paper, 1973; Stanley Trapido, "South Africa in a Comparative Analysis of Industrialisation", *Journal of Development Studies*, 7 (1971). During the 1970s the "Societies of southern Africa" seminar at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICS) in London became the major forum for Marxist historical scholarship on the region. Among the many surveys of Poulantzas and Althusser's work, see the following succinct (and sympathetic) explanation: Bob Jessop, *The Capitalist State* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 45–62.

32. See the following article authored collectively: Rob Davies, David Kaplan, Mike Morris, and Dan O'Meara, "Class Struggle and the Periodisation of the State in South Africa", *Review of African Political Economy*, 7 (1976), pp. 4–30.

33. Apart from the mentioned article by Rob Davies *et al.*, see Harold Wolpe, "The 'White Working Class' in South Africa", *Economy and Society* 5 (1976), pp. 197–240; Rob Davies, *Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa, 1900–1960: An Historical Materialist Analysis of Class Formation and Class Relations* (New York, 1979).

34. On the evolution of the Wits History Workshop see, for instance, Jonathan Hyslop's article about "E.P. Thompson in South Africa: The Practice and Politics of Social History in an Era of Revolt and Transition, 1976–2012" in the present issue 61.1 of the *International Review of Social History*. Precise considerations about the Workshop's history can also be found in: Albert Grundlingh, "Transcending Transitions? The Social History Tradition of Historical Writing in South Africa in the 1990s", inaugural lecture, University of South Africa, 20 February 1997.



outside the country, and a proponent of the structuralist brand of social history – has observed, the trend towards this “Thompsonian” brand of social history rapidly accelerated from the mid-1980s and paralleled the turn towards heterodox Gramscian versions of Marxism by many of the intelligentsia on the European left.<sup>35</sup> In South Africa, some historians, most famously Charles van Onselen,<sup>36</sup> reacted against heavily theoretical “top-down” explanations devoid of human agency, consciousness, experience and, at times, regional and chronological specificity, in favour of an empirically oriented “history from below”. O’Meara attributed this to the influence of the “British cult of the ‘Poverty of Theory’”.<sup>37</sup> The group was interested in the elusive links between economy, culture, experience, and consciousness, and focused mainly on “marginalized” groups that had not hitherto been thought worthy of investigation. Many of the social historians were committed intellectually and politically to the overthrow of the apartheid regime, and in the popular struggles of the 1980s championed history as a mobilizing tool. This agenda tended to lead them to disregard the history of ordinary whites.<sup>38</sup> They were interested in the plight of the most oppressed and in the revolutionary or potentially revolutionary classes, and the racist and reactionary character of most whites, including the white working class, seemed obvious.

Some scholarship within this tradition did explore the complexity of white society and the struggles of poor whites – against mine owners and Johannesburg planning authorities (Van Onselen<sup>39</sup>), and *meneeren*, rural notables (Tim Clynick<sup>40</sup>) – or explored white working-class

35. Dan O’Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948 to 1994* (Athens, OH, 1996), p. 425.

36. See his collection of essays: Charles van Onselen, *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914* (Johannesburg [etc.], 2001 [1982]).

37. O’Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p. 425; Grundlingh, “Transcending Transitions”, p. 4.

38. An important caveat should be added at this point: this article calls for a critical historicization of ordinary whites. In doing so, it does not focus on those heroic and avant-garde milieus of whites who, in various ways, consciously chose to oppose and fight against apartheid. Many of the best historians (and other scholars) of their generation were among them, and the Wits History Workshop was particularly characterized by such oppositional white academics. While a new radical history of ordinary whites does not deny their role (or, for that matter, the worthiness of historical study of them), it nevertheless concentrates on developing conceptual and methodological tools for studying those majorities among whites in South Africa, who, while being non-elite themselves, in different ways accepted, participated in, or benefited from the apartheid regime.

39. Van Onselen, “The World the Mine Owners Made: Social Themes in the Economic Transformation of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914”, and “The Main Reef Road into the Working Class. Proletarianisation, Unemployment and Class Consciousness amongst Johannesburg’s Afrikaner Poor, 1890–1914”, in Van Onselen, *New Babylon, New Nineveh*, pp. 1–46 and 309–367.

40. Timothy Clynick, “Afrikaner Political Mobilization in the Western Transvaal: Popular Consciousness and the State, 1920–1930” (Ph.D., Queen’s University, 1996).

life (Lis Lange<sup>41</sup>). Jon Hyslop added a local perspective to the trend of whiteness studies emerging from American labour history when he linked, with his notion of “white labourism”, class formation with the invocation of white privilege in the development of a self-consciously white imperial working class.<sup>42</sup> And in his magnificently textured social history of the 1922 Rand Revolt, Jeremy Krikler teased out the “tragic paradoxes” of the Revolt, where white workers “fought against [...] despotic employers, economic insecurity, a state bent to the interests of their masters”, just as they fought for “white privilege”.<sup>43</sup> However, generally absent was and still is a broader account of how ordinary whites related to the production, organization, and maintenance of a racist society. The very precision and empirical focus of these studies perhaps makes it difficult for them to see their subjects not only as part of the rural poor, the “army of the unemployed”, or even the “aristocrats of labour”, but simultaneously as elites, bound to segregated society by the privileges of whiteness, however contested its terms often were. Some of these studies, particularly those of Hyslop and Krikler, do, in American historian of whiteness David Roediger’s terms, join race and class.<sup>44</sup> They do, however, see whiteness essentially as an “effect” of capitalist development and fail to connect the racism of a class to that of a society as a whole. Robert Morrell’s work on settler masculinity in colonial Natal is a significant exception, as he demonstrates how the production of particular styles of whiteness, masculinity, and middle-class identity were joined at every point.<sup>45</sup>

The starting point of these social historians in Marxist theory and historiography may account for some of the mentioned blind spots. Linking race and class demands confident theoretical engagement as the work of Roediger and the ensuing debates have shown. While Marxism offers some foundation for this, the variations favoured by South African social historians, drawing on E.P. Thompson’s *Poverty of Theory*,<sup>46</sup> iconoclastic and deeply critical of the structuralist variant of Marxist theory, has often generated a marked lack of enthusiasm for “theoretical heavy breathing”.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, the analytic and political primacy

41. Lis Lange, *White, Poor and Angry. White Working-Class Families in Johannesburg* (Aldershot, 2003).

42. Jon Hyslop, “The Imperial Working Class Makes itself White: White Laborism in Britain, Australia and South Africa”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 12 (December 1999), pp. 398–421.

43. Jeremy Krikler, *The Rand Revolt: The 1922 Insurrection and Racial Killing in South Africa* (Johannesburg [etc.], 2005).

44. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness. Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London [etc.], 1991), pp. 11–13.

45. Robert Morrell, *From Boys to Gentlemen: Settler Masculinity in Colonial Natal, 1880–1920* (Pretoria, 2001).

46. E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays: Or an Orrery of Errors* (London, 1978).

47. *Ibid.*, p. 405.

they attributed to class meant that they were less able to address adequately the culture and history of ordinary white people in a society where power and society were racialized, and for whom “being white” was central to identity and everyday experience.<sup>48</sup> It was not surprising, then, that, when a History Workshop conference with the theme “‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ in modern South Africa” was organized at the University of the Witwatersrand in July 2001, few papers offered any novel historical analysis of whites or whiteness.<sup>49</sup> Up until today, the history and ethnography of ordinary whites in modern South Africa has witnessed few theoretical, methodological, or empirical innovations from the domains that are associated with a social history à la Wits History Workshop.

Some qualifications to this assessment are needed, however. Already, in the early 1990s, when Marxist social history was at its most commanding, a group of South Africanists, some from this movement, whose methods if not theoretical and ideological commitments coincided with those of the “history from below” social historians, turned their attention to the study of poor whites. Some essays by this group demonstrated impressive attention to fine-grained micro-history.<sup>50</sup> John Bottomley was one of the few historians to grasp the fact that despite growing affluence, poor whiteism represented an ongoing spectre that shaped public policy towards whites – well into the apartheid years.<sup>51</sup> The project, however, was not able to sustainably revive the history and anthropology of poor, working class, and other “non-elite” whites.

Other interesting studies of whites in apartheid society have begun to emerge more recently. For instance, Clive Glaser is researching how immigrant Portuguese, though marginalized by Afrikaner nationalist conceptions of racial purity, eventually managed to blend into the whiteness conjured up by successive waves of Afrikaner nationalists.<sup>52</sup> Then, Lucien van der Walt has explored, in his research into anarchism and syndicalism,

48. In a similar vein, Roediger argued that most Marxist-inclined studies in America failed to press for answers to the problem of why so many workers in the United States define themselves as “white”. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, p. 6.

49. Notable exceptions included Bridget Kenny, “Restructuring, Recognition and Race: The Story of a White Afrikaans Shopworker’s Struggle”, and Jeremy Krikler, “White Working Class Identity and the Rand Revolt”. All presented at “The Burden of Race: ‘Whiteness’ and ‘Blackness’ in Modern South Africa”, University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, Johannesburg, South Africa.

50. See Robert Morrell (ed.), *White but Poor: Essays on the History of Poor Whites in Southern Africa, 1880–1940* (Pretoria, 1992). Particularly interesting contributions to this edited volume are Albert Grundlingh, “‘God het ons arme mense die houtjies gegee’: Poor White Woodcutters in the Southern Cape Forest Area, c.1900–1939”, pp. 40–56; and Susan Parnell, “Slums, Segregation and Poor Whites in Johannesburg, 1920–1934”, pp. 115–129.

51. John Bottomley, “The Orange Free State and the Rebellion of 1914: The Influence of Industrialization, Poverty and Poor Whiteism”, in Morrell, *White but Poor*, pp. 29–39.

52. Clive Glaser, “Portuguese Immigrant History in South Africa: A Preliminary Overview”, *African Historical Review*, 42:2 (2010), pp. 61–83.

the history of some of these whites who defied the system that gave them their privilege.<sup>53</sup> Whites were well-represented in local anarchist and syndicalist circles, and Van der Walt draws on transnational perspectives to show how their identities and consciousness were forged more in relation to international political circuits than local variants of whiteness. The study of protagonists like Van der Walt's anarchists and syndicalists is thus an important empirical counter-balance to the generalization that all whites were – necessarily – implicated in the reproduction and maintenance of a racist social order in twentieth-century South Africa. Moreover, by investigating how anarchists and syndicalists struggled to “unmake” whiteness, and the ideologies and political economy that sustained it, work like Van der Walt's represents a substantial contribution to “denaturalizing” histories of whites.

Some recent studies are clearly challenging both conceptually and historically the dominance of class as well as the idea of whiteness as homogenous and unproblematic. However, they do not yet comprise a definite historiographic trend. In addition, though while ordinary whites do feature in disparate historical traditions, the analyses they employ tends to cast ordinary whites in “large” categories, as “poor whites”, heroic “*volk*”, or “workers”, thus failing, with some exceptions, to connect macro-processes of production, ideology, discipline, and politics with the intimate histories and ethnographies of white everyday life.<sup>54</sup> Mapping these smaller everyday zones is important if we are to comprehend the underlying cohesion of white society during apartheid, despite tensions, ambiguities and contradictions, manifest most obviously in acts of transgression, defiance and permissiveness.

#### SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL HISTORY IN AN AGE OF POST-MARXISM AND POST-APARTHEID

The Wits History Workshop was a loose amalgam of historians and scholars from cognate disciplines, bound by a broad theoretical and methodological consensus (and by old friendships). Through seminars, workshops, and conferences, over nearly three decades, along with several volumes of essays, each with a substantial thematic, theoretical and

53. Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* (Edinburgh [etc.], 2009). On anarchism in the colonial and post-colonial settings in general, see Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt (eds), *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution* (Amsterdam, 2010).

54. For elaboration of the concept of “intimate history”, see Anurima Bunerji and Illaria Distanto, “An Intimate Ethnography”, *Women and Performance. A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 19 (March 2009), pp. 35–60.

methodological introduction,<sup>55</sup> the Workshop became the most important group within professional South African history in general. Without doubt, the Workshop's vision of social history is central to imagining a new radical history of whites under apartheid. At the same time, the ways the Workshop started to flounder during South Africa's postcolonial daybreak in the late 1990s and early 2000s should be considered if some of this innovation and energy is to be incorporated in future perspectives. By the 1990s, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of post-structuralism and the onset of the "culture wars", Marxist-inspired approaches internationally encountered profound crises of credibility and relevance. Several of the bottom-up Marxist historiographies experienced renewal in response to these political and intellectual upheavals.<sup>56</sup> These challenges and ripostes testify to fundamental questioning of the theoretical, empirical, and political dimensions of the discipline, especially to social history as it had crystallized in a series of countries in the 1970s.

The evolution South African social history with its closely linked historical and political concerns differed considerably from the above mentioned pattern, as Marxism remained the major reference point of critical academia for much longer than in Western Europe or North America: It only started to lose impetus in the post-apartheid 1990s. Once the global reaction against the confident claims of Marxist theory and historiography also arrived in South Africa, with a "delay" of five to ten years, its social historians seemed little prepared to respond adequately to the challenges of history-writing in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>57</sup>

This inertness would last for the years to come. Attending a 2009 colloquium on the thirtieth anniversary of the Wits History Workshop, I was struck by the absence of engagement with more recent theory and historiographic approaches, including comparative ones, necessary to plot a

55. See particularly Belinda Bozzoli (ed.), *Labour, Townships and Protest* (Johannesburg, 1978); Belinda Bozzoli (ed.), *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal* (Johannesburg, 1983); Belinda Bozzoli (ed.), *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg, 1994).

56. For a book-length attempt to critically respond to the conceptual and methodological challenges while attempting to preserve much of the thrust and the concerns of Marxism-inflected social history, see the mentioned Eley, *A Crooked Line*. For an example more on the side of the different kinds of "linguistic turn"-inspired currents, see for instance Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Deterministic Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s", *History Workshop Journal*, 42 (1996), pp. 19–35.

57. The sense of crisis, however, went beyond the confines of social history or any other sub-field and affected history as a whole. As John Wright commented at the 1999 meeting of the South African Historical Society, the advent of the "new South Africa" had seen the "decommissioning" of history, replaced by heritage. John Wright, "Probing the Predicaments of Academic History in Contemporary South Africa", paper presented to the South African Historical Society Conference, University of the Western Cape, 11–14 July 1999.

“life after thirty”.<sup>58</sup> A penetrating, yet sympathetic critique of this kind of social history written by Deborah Posel, a Workshop historian and sympathizer, came to similar conclusions. Most of this research, she says, was “associated with the Marxist version of social history that had captivated the northern academy”.<sup>59</sup> She adds, however, that while this work used the language of class, there was little attention to its conceptual and epistemological underpinnings; indeed, after its “early theoretical positioning [...] it largely became a matter of consensus, as if the theoretical work had been done and settled”. The 1990s saw “theoretical unsettling” but no explicit theoretical debate.<sup>60</sup>

Any radical historiography of whites shares many intellectual and political ambitions with the older traditions of Marxism-inspired South African social history. These reside in, amongst others, the claim for a *radical* approach, i.e. tying the writing of history to a politically and theoretically emancipatory project. Such emancipatory ends, however, might be smaller-scale today than they were in the past, when Marxism imbued history writing with a grand vision. The most important purpose of creating a radical historiography of whites might be to render their histories problematic, to challenge and destabilize whiteness as a taken-for-granted, essentialized, and homogenized category. Marxist social history, embedded within local South African conventions and adrift from the theoretical anchors that might have enriched and renewed it, no longer provides all of the tools to write such a history.

## SEARCHING FOR STARTING POINTS AND THEORY

### *History in a racial state*

Existing historical scholarship has limitations in understanding the dynamics of power, ideology, and race in modern South Africa. The search for conceptual starting points for a “new” history of whites leads to other literature, generated by black South African commentators, generally produced outside the academy. This is similar to the situation in the US where, as Roediger writes, some of the most compelling insights into the “souls of white folk” in America come from African Americans like James Baldwin, W.E.B. Du Bois, and bell hooks, whose “secret” knowledge of whites comes from seeing “without being observed”.<sup>61</sup> The same, as I will illustrate

58. Arianna Lissoni, Noor Nieftagodien, and Shireen Ally, “Introduction: ‘Life after Thirty’ – A Critical Celebration”, *African Studies*, 69 (April 2010), pp. 1–12.

59. Deborah Posel, “Social History and the Wits History Workshop”, *African Studies*, 69 (April 2010), pp. 29–40, 32.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

61. David Roediger, “Critical Studies of Whiteness, USA: Origins and Arguments”, *Theoria*, 98 (December 2001), pp. 72–98, 78; James Baldwin, “On Being ‘White’. ... and Other Lies”, in David Roediger (ed.), *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to be White*

below, applies in South Africa where black critical commentary goes back to at least the early part of the twentieth century, offering perspectives useful in understanding the role of ordinary white people in modern South Africa. For instance, in the early twentieth century, Solomon T. Plaatje, a black South African who worked for the British colonial authorities and was a founder of the South African Native National Congress (later the African National Congress), identified colonialism, segregation and attendant racist ideologies and practices as the “white problem” in South Africa.<sup>62</sup> He hoped that Cape liberalism, which promised some amelioration to educated Africans like himself, would prevail in the new Union of South Africa. However, with consolidation of the Union after 1910, Plaatje, with others from the black Christian elite of the time, became increasingly aware that the political struggle between Cape liberals and conservative Boers from the interior had little relevance for most Africans. He detected a fundamental consensus among these different groups on white dominance that seldom needed to be made explicit. At the height of apartheid, Steve Biko, intellectual, activist, and founder of the Black Consciousness Movement, made a similar point, describing an essential unity among whites, even professed liberals.<sup>63</sup> While this article argues for a non-essentialized view on whites, which does not assume its a priori unity, essayists like Plaatje and Biko still point to a fundamental factor of South African society during long periods of the twentieth century, namely its racialized segregation. If we hope to understand something of the interior lives of ordinary whites, we must first acknowledge their location within this segregated society.

While these insights indicate that for a new radical history of whites the starting point should not be class, but race, it does not automatically imply which of the numerous conceptual avenues might be suited best for understanding “race” in this context. Here, I suggest incorporating the concept of a racial state, elaborated most substantially by David Goldberg.<sup>64</sup> According to Goldberg, a racial state is one where race is integral to the conceptual, philosophical, and material emergence of a state and its ongoing management. The notion of “racial state” also links to one of the major concerns of recent scholarship on colonial and postcolonial

(New York, 1999), pp. 177–180; W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk”, in Roediger (ed.), *Black on White*, pp. 184–203; bell hooks, “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination”, in Roediger (ed.), *Black on White*, pp. 38–53.

62. Solomon T. Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion* (London, 1917). <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1452>; last accessed 13 December 2014.

63. Steve Biko, “Black Souls in White Skins”, in Aelred Stubbs (ed.), *I Write What I Like. Steve Biko, a Selection of his Writings* (Johannesburg, 2004), pp. 20–28.

64. David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford [etc.], 1993); David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Oxford [etc.], 2002).

societies, namely the role played by the colonial state.<sup>65</sup> Recognizing the role of the colonial and racial state, including genealogies of racial ideologies, tensions, and circulations of racial thought and practices and techniques of rule, represents a critical advance in re-imagining a history of ordinary white people in segregationist and apartheid South Africa in which class figures, but is not necessarily at the centre of every point of analysis.

### *Lessons of Subaltern Studies*

Subaltern Studies emerged within Indian historiography in the early 1980s. Like South African social history, it was a politically inspired “history from below”. It was driven by scholars energized by the intellectual and ideological problems of history-writing in a postcolonial society, dissatisfied with both older, orthodox Marxist and conventional nationalist accounts of India’s liberation.<sup>66</sup> This movement offers some interesting pointers towards a new radical historiography of ordinary white people in South Africa (and elsewhere). While not reading Subaltern Studies too literally, lessons may be drawn from its postcolonial, dissident location, from its particular historiographic and methodological positions and the theory that informs these, and from its eclecticism, bound by a common focus on subalterns. This has permitted an ongoing conversation with Marxism (with positions ranging from the critically appreciative to the dismissively critical), borrowing from diverse theoretical and disciplinary sources, what Dipesh Chakrabarty describes as “generative mistakes”, and the building of a strong, dynamic, although never homogenous, historiography.<sup>67</sup>

Initially, scholars within Subaltern Studies were influenced by Antonio Gramsci’s Marxism. They also drew theoretically and methodologically from other Marxist-oriented social histories, including that being developed in South Africa,<sup>68</sup> and their intellectual agenda, at least at the beginning, was by no means a substantial break from the cultural Marxism of the day.<sup>69</sup>

65. On the colonial state see: John Comaroff, “Reflections on the Colonial State in South Africa and Elsewhere: Factions, Fragments, Facts and Fictions”, *Social Identities*, 4 (October 1998), pp. 321–336. As Comaroff notes, the sort of anthropology and history needed to flesh out the colonial state (and its legacies in the postcolonial one), owe more to Michel Foucault than Marx.

66. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography”, *Nepantla: Views from the South*, 1 (2000), pp. 9–32, 14.

67. Comment by Dipesh Chakrabarty at “Subaltern Studies: Historical World-making Thirty Years On”, Australian National University, Canberra, 3–5 August 2011.

68. *Ibid.*

69. Even Vivek Chibber, a vocal recent critic of the Subaltern Studies group who sees its later turn to post-structuralism as already ordained from the very beginning, acknowledges the proximity to major currents of Marxism of the time in the initial phase. See Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London [etc.], 2013), p. 7.



A major difference from Marxist social history, however, and arguably a reason for the early vitality of Subaltern Studies, was the re-definition of “the political” by one of its founding figures, Ranajit Guha. He was not willing to be bound by the primacy of class, and was guided more by ethnography than theory in considering “tradition” and such arrangements as kinship or friendship groups as structures and strategies invoked in colonial and postcolonial India. Advocates of Subaltern Studies have tended to present the movement as an intellectual orientation rather than a body of theory; and the movement’s common “theory” became increasingly difficult to discern. But it was always more than a local variant of “history from below”. As Guha wrote (in what was to become a refrain in postcolonial critical theory), capitalism in India developed differently from the West, and “conventional” Marxist narratives about modernity and the development of class thus did not necessarily apply to that context. Most particularly, the landed classes in India were not overthrown, so just as subaltern people resisted domination, they did not necessarily do so in the language of class common in modern European politics.

From the end of the 1980s, as the focus of Subaltern Studies shifted from the everyday lives, experiences, and consciousness of ordinary people to the ideologies, institutions, and loci of power of the state, so its theoretical foundations moved from Gramsci to Foucault and Said. And although the annual volumes of *Subaltern Studies* still published essays on “history from below”, there was, in practice, an increasing concentration on textual analysis and the ways in which major groups of the population were marginalized through these texts (which were written by and instrumental for those with privilege, economic means, and power).<sup>70</sup>

Subaltern Studies never pretended to offer a fully-fledged alternate historiography within Indian history-writing, rather emphasizing the critique of dominant views as its main objective. The intense debates and contests within Subaltern Studies meant it never settled into orthodoxy. Theoretical restlessness, pragmatism, and the absence of a “total” narrative are approaches appropriate not only for those interested in hidden, insurgent histories of specific groups, but for any historiography. However, these traits are particularly useful in writing histories of apartheid-era whites where there are not only different constellations of both domination and subalternity, but also deeply-entrenched conventional wisdoms among both contemporaries and subsequent historians.

Chakrabarty, one of the group’s leading proponents, already in the mid-1980s emphasized its continuity, writing that through dissent and debate and various phases of theoretical orientation, the core interest of Subaltern Studies remained “the composite culture of resistance to, and

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

acceptance of domination and hierarchy”. Although Chakrabarty was, as later turns in the theoretical outlooks of Subaltern Studies would show, perhaps somewhat premature in his point about continuity, this is probably the closest approximation to a definition of subalternity.<sup>71</sup> He has highlighted three major historiographic thrusts that have remained abiding features of Subaltern Studies.<sup>72</sup> Each of these are, in my view, relevant to a new historiography of ordinary whites. There is, firstly, the separation of histories of power from universalist histories of capital. In that sense, the critic Vivek Chibber is correct in asserting that Subaltern Studies constituted a critical theoretical departure from Marxism from the onset. While Marxists understood politics within political economy, Guha redefined the “political” and emphasized that, just as subaltern politics drew on class consciousness, it drew equally on such areas as kinship and experience. While this view represented a shift away from Marxist understanding of power, it coincided more with Foucault’s ideas of discipline, biopower and governmentality (to which Guha added domination and subordination): “Traditional European Marxist political thought, which fused the two [capital and power], would therefore always be relevant but inadequate for theorizing power in colonial-modern histories”.<sup>73</sup> This broader conception of politics yields enormous analytic flexibility. When studying ordinary whites in South Africa, the organization and techniques of power that Guha sought to comprehend are particularly useful for examining small-scale politics that take non-class forms, and which break the analytic and methodological tendency towards homogenization and large-scale analysis inherent in conventional Marxist categories.

Secondly, Guha challenged the taken-for-granted “nation”. In a stance critical of statist nationalism and its historiographies, which marked Subaltern Studies from the outset, Guha argued that colonialism and nationalism in India instituted “domination without hegemony”, and there was no unitary “nation” to speak of, which thus becomes a fiction and a political project.<sup>74</sup> For David Ludden, the “originality of Subaltern Studies came to be its striving to re-write the nation outside [...] state-centered national discourse”.<sup>75</sup> In apartheid South Africa, where the production of

71. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Invitation to a Dialogue”, in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi 1985), pp. 364–376, 376. He went on to specify that members of the editorial collective were united more by their rejection of certain intellectual positions and tendencies than their acceptance of a unified alternative. Cited in David Ludden, “Introduction: A Brief History of Subalternity”, in David Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalisation of South Asia* (New Delhi, 2001), pp. 1–39, 18.

72. Chakrabarty, “Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography”, p. 15.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

74. *Ibid.*, pp. 15; 21.

75. Ludden, “A Brief History of Subalternity”, p. 20.

the (white) nation, as opposed to the other “nations” living on the territory, represented perhaps *the* major political, ideological, and disciplinary project of the official state and the whites represented by it, this seems an obvious and essential line of enquiry.

Thirdly, the Subalternists saw the archive as the subject of analysis and methodological challenge, as ethnographic rather than extractive.<sup>76</sup> There are few written sources for peasant India, and, from the outset, Guha not only aligned himself closely with the work of anthropologists, but also emphasized the need for historians to develop strategies to read the archive beyond the biases of elites. This hermeneutic is also essential if we are to track how genealogies of the “nation” fused with the state in apartheid South Africa and how they were contested, disrupted, and influenced by the counter-discourse of certain groups of ordinary whites (apart from the massive contestations by those oppressed through the apartheid regime, which had multiple effects on the intra-hegemonic tensions among groups of whites). These multilayered lines of conflict are very amenable for including the “archive” as a major dimension of analysis in the history South African ordinary whites.

Reorientation from trying to reveal “the true form of the subaltern” to “how the subaltern is represented”,<sup>77</sup> with the growing ascendancy of literary theorists, prompted a reaction from some Subalternists aligned to the political left. A number left the collective. Historian Sumit Sarkar was a prominent advocate of a broader materialist dissent that emerged not only in Subaltern Studies, but postcolonial studies in general. Lamenting the drift towards analyses of representation and power, he wrote: “Radical Left-Wing social history [...] has been collapsed into cultural studies and critiques of colonial discourse and we have moved from Thompson to Foucault and, even more, Said.”<sup>78</sup> The pervasiveness of the power-knowledge complex, he argued, raised the academically and politically debilitating possibility of reifying the subaltern. Elsewhere he wrote that

the moods stimulated by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* which have been transplanted to later volumes of *Subaltern Studies* have provided for many

76. Helen Macdonald, “A Conversation: Subaltern Studies in South Asia and Post-Colonial Anthropology in Africa”, *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 32 (2009), pp. 59–68, 63. This analysis addresses the type and categories of data gathered in the archive and how the archive was managed and curated, revealing the mindsets of colonial and postcolonial officialdom. All concerns related to the question of the colonial archives are also at the heart of: Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ, 2009).

77. Perhaps the iconic example of this shift is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice”, in Gary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL, 1988), pp. 271–313.

78. Sumit Sarkar, “The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies”, in Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies*, pp. 400–429, 402.

intellectuals an overall framework that combines the virtue of apparent radicalism with a satisfactory distance from the radicalism of yesteryear, now widely assumed to be finally and deservedly dead.<sup>79</sup>

Subaltern Studies has always claimed not just to be the study of colonial history, but to enable and inform political practice; yet, for Sarkar, homogenizing “colonial-western” cultural hegemony and presenting it as all-pervasive and virtually irresistible meant “abandoning any quest for immanent critique through the possibility of conflict and groups taking over and using in diverse and partially autonomous ways elements from dominant structures and discourses”.<sup>80</sup> There was a danger, in short, of fleeing a radical history to which social critique is inherent and reducing the intellectual foundations of political insurgency to a “dull hagiography of the subaltern”.<sup>81</sup> Adding to this point of political domestication, Vivek Chibber points to “blue ribbon reception” in western academies by that strand of Subaltern Studies more interested in representation – a reception that contrasts it with the way Marxist-oriented South African, Latin American, and Middle Eastern “histories from below” have been seen (or, rather, overseen).<sup>82</sup>

Like Chibber, Ileana Rodriguez, a member of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group was deeply critical of the political impotence of the later versions of Subaltern Studies that became so fashionable, especially in the North American academy. In asserting a necessary alliance between historiography and insurgency, she argues that, despite the political defects of the left, and the recognition that orthodox Marxism was no longer adequate, there should be no retreat to the theoretical tendency of Subaltern Studies and, instead, a renewed interest in subaltern consciousness and agency, acknowledging all their contradictory complexity. Further, she says there should be a “way of thinking the political within the academic, of wondering through which kinds of articulation could theory be political and contribute to the elucidation of oppression [...]. Could [subalternism] come to occupy the place of Marxism as the new liberatory theory of practice?”<sup>83</sup> Presumably, she meant that variant more closely aligned with radical and left-wing oriented social history. If we hope for a new *radical* history of ordinary whites associated with a politics of change, this concern must be remembered.

79. Sumit Sarkar, “The Many Worlds of Indian History”, in Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Dehli, 1998, 2nd ed.), pp. 1–49, 4.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–3.

82. Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, p. 8.

83. Ileana Rodriguez, “A New Debate on Subaltern Studies”, *LASA Forum*, Latin American Studies Association, XXXIII (2002), pp. 14–15, 15.

TOWARDS A NEW RADICAL HISTORY OF ORDINARY  
WHITES*Themes*

As Deborah Posel has stressed, a history “of” below does not necessarily have to be a history “from” below.<sup>84</sup> In light of the historiographic lessons from Subaltern Studies, its trajectories, tensions within the movement, and criticism from without, a new, radical historiography of ordinary whites under apartheid may be shaped by two fundamental historical concerns.<sup>85</sup> The first concern is the racial state. Given its centrality in shaping white as well as black lives, its evolution is a logical starting point. Consequently, the work undertaken in the 1970s on the history of racial capitalism and the successive hardening of racial categories since the late nineteenth century should not be neglected, for it reminds us of the position of *all* whites within South African capitalism and the South African state. Questions arising from a focus on the lives and experience of ordinary whites should thus include enquiries on how elites sought to “make” them into racialized citizens, on the ideologies and discourses produced, and on the methods of discipline and the techniques of governance drawn upon to inscribe these into daily routines. It is clear that such enquiries must go beyond conventional intellectual history or a deep reading of texts by apartheid intellectuals. Two fields of study might offer particularly stimulating models in this regard: First, historiographies of other authoritarian societies, especially when these had a component of racialized and/or ethnicized segregation; second, colonial history. In the case of South Africa, an essay by John Comaroff offers a useful example of how questions might be drawn from this field by focusing on issues about the exercise of power and the working of the colonial state.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, enquiry could consider carefully how the legislative and administrative apparatus of the apartheid state shaped, organized, and controlled the lives of white people. Similar questions have been widely posed for the black experience but are absent in the historiography of whites. The first major legislation of the apartheid government, installed in 1948, were laws prohibiting whites from having sex with, or marrying, people of other races; that, in its early years, the state concentrated as much, if not more, on whites than blacks is an indicator of the significance of such a focus. It could include analysis of particular legislation, submissions, and debates, and how, or whether, such legislation set parameters for the ways whites lived their daily lives. In addition to laws on

84. Posel, “Social History and the Wits History Workshop”, p. 38.

85. Beyond these historical questions there are ethical ones. I will turn to some of them in the concluding section.

86. Comaroff, “Reflections on the Colonial State in South Africa”.

sex, the Population Registration and Group Areas Acts also deeply affected whites.<sup>87</sup>

The second fundamental historiographic concern is nationalism, more precisely Afrikaner nationalism. Like any nationalist movement, it consisted of a coalition of class, regional, ideological, and other interests, often structured by gender. Some of the better-known movements and institutions of Afrikanerdom, like the Broederbond, the Suid Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns (South African Academy of Science and Arts) have received close scholarly attention.<sup>88</sup> These studies (positioned rather outside the South African historiographic mainstream) could be re-read fruitfully in the light of new questions. The work of scholars like Lindie Koorts on Afrikaner professors promises to add to our understanding of tensions and debates within the upper reaches of Afrikanerdom.<sup>89</sup>

Ideology, science, and the role of intellectuals must feature prominently in questions on how elites tried to constitute whiteness. This could extend to ways that ideology was “made real” for ordinary whites through, for instance, the state’s intellectual, bureaucratic, and technocratic cadres. In the early apartheid years, social sciences became increasingly important within Afrikaner nationalism, and anthropology of blacks and sociology of whites assumed a significant role in underpinning and organizing state policy. Intellectuals at the Afrikaans universities, like Geoffrey Cronje, a University of Pretoria sociologist and technocrat, exercised considerable influence within the state, as members of boards, advisors, and appointees to senior civil service posts. They often wrote and published extensively and their published work has been assessed critically by scholars of intellectual history and the history of knowledge like John Coetzee, Saul Dubow, Mark Sanders, and most comprehensively, Aletta Norval.<sup>90</sup> However, if we begin by examining how the nation was engineered, a more ethnographical

87. The Population Registration Act (1950) required all citizens and inhabitants of South Africa to be classified according to their racial and ethnic group. These details were recorded in the Population Register. The 1950 Group Areas Act assigned racial groups to different residential and business areas of towns. Both pieces of legislation were central for the development of apartheid.

88. See Ivor Wilkins and Hans Strydom, *The Super-Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond* (Cape Town, 2012, 2nd ed.); Pieter Kapp, *Draer van ’n droom: Die geskiedenis van die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* (Hermanus, 2009).

89. Lindie Koorts, “The Professors and the Politicians: Some Reflections on the Influence of Afrikaner Intellectuals in the Nationalist Movement, c.1939”, paper presented to the Historical Association of South Africa, Pretoria, July 2012.

90. See for instance J.M. Coetzee, “The mind of apartheid: Geoffrey Cronje (1907–)”, *Social Dynamics*, 17 (1991), pp. 1–35; Saul Dubow, *Science and Society in Southern Africa* (Manchester, 2001); Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820–2000* (Oxford, 2006); Mark Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (Durham, NC, 2002); Aletta J. Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* (London, 1996).

approach is needed to investigate how the ideas of intellectuals like Cronje penetrated the ideologies, routines, and disciplines of whites in everyday life. Posing these questions leads to a history of bureaucracy (and its interactions with the forms of knowledge of the broader white population) more than to a mere intellectual history of certain actors. As I have argued elsewhere, Cronje's career may illuminate our understanding beyond vague ideas about the "mind of apartheid" and offer instead a specific ethnographic understanding of how a particular bureaucratic intellectual set about formulating the nation, and of the bureaucratic and administrative channels he used in creating legitimating ideology.<sup>91</sup>

Apartheid medicine, particularly psychiatry, offers the opportunity to study the ways in which "abnormality", and thus "normality", were understood in the defining of whiteness. Tiffany Jones' work is valuable and timely in this regard.<sup>92</sup> It would also be interesting to understand if, and how, psychopathologies were "provincialized" and whether, as Will Jackson has shown for colonial Kenya, apartheid itself "caused" particular psychoses among whites.<sup>93</sup>

As the National Party tried to broker consensus among Afrikaner groups, commissions of enquiry became an important technique of governance. While Adam Ashforth did a fine job of demonstrating how such commissions generated apartheid's "legitimizing" ideologies,<sup>94</sup> gaps remain in what we know of how anxieties and concerns about whites featured in their deliberations and recommendations.

"Space" is another possible field of enquiry. Following an interesting study on the ways that space figured in the imagination and planning of both colonial and postcolonial elites in India, similar questions might be raised in a South African context: How did apartheid elites imagine space, and how did they deem some space white and others black?<sup>95</sup> My own study on work colonies for whites, for instance, has highlighted that careful attention was paid to ensuring that white towns and cities became solidly middle class, with concomitant efforts to "sanitize" these landscapes of people who undermined the mythology of whites as middle class, respectable, God-fearing, sober, and straight.<sup>96</sup>

91. Neil Roos, "Alcohol Panic, Social Engineering and some Reflections on the Management of Whites in Early Apartheid Society, 1948–1960", *The Historical Journal*, 58 (December 2015), pp. 1167–1189.

92. Tiffany F. Jones, *Psychiatry, Mental Institutions and the Mad in Apartheid South Africa* (New York, 2012).

93. Will Jackson, *Madness and Marginality. The Lives of Kenya's White Insane* (Manchester 2013).

94. Adam Ashforth, *The Politics of Official Discourse in Twentieth Century South Africa* (Oxford, 1990).

95. Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago [etc.], 2004).

96. Neil Roos "Work Colonies for White Men and the Historiography of Apartheid", *Social History*, 36 (2011), pp. 54–76.

Other questions necessary for a radical history of apartheid society involve asking how ordinary white people responded to these ideological and governmental initiatives, and by what means, and in what roles, did they become part of apartheid culture and the apartheid state.<sup>97</sup> Historians and anthropologists of whites in apartheid society must acknowledge that the “resistance” trope does not help in understanding work, life, and culture among whites under apartheid. Popular complicity, collusion, and co-optation are more apt. However, as Gyanendra Pandey and Gautam Bhadra remind us, idioms of domination and subordination are always intertwined, and this “contradictory complexity” must be interrogated if we are to understand something of the ways in which white consciousness formed.<sup>98</sup> These simultaneities have methodological implications to which I will return below. From such a perspective we might ask about the material, ideological, and cultural grounds for accommodation, taking care to identify gender, ethnic, class, or other differences, and how these were deployed in particular contexts at particular times, and whether ordinary whites defied (even if only symbolically) citizenship imposed from above, thus co-shaping its evolution. We might investigate the fate of whites who transgressed the terms of whiteness imagined from above, remembering that such transgression was unlikely to have constituted resistance to apartheid itself. In this respect, German *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of everyday life, with its interest in sociologies of work and the ways that compliance was produced among ordinary Germans under Nazism, offers some useful comparative examples.<sup>99</sup>

97. I use the term “apartheid culture” here much as Goldberg uses the term “racist culture”. Whites could sustain many other versions of identity and culture, but their whiteness bound them into apartheid culture (blacks were more “forced” than “bound” into this culture, although some groups, like those implicated in the homelands, also actively reproduced and contributed to it). See Goldberg, *Racist Culture*.

98. Gyanendra Pandey, “In Defence of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today”, in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *A Subaltern Studies Reader* (Minneapolis, MN, 1997), pp. 1–34; Gautam Bhadra, “The Mentality of Subalternity: Khantanama or Rajdharma”, in Guha (ed.), *A Subaltern Studies Reader*, pp. 163–100.

99. From the 1980s, *Alltagsgeschichte* evolved as a creative adoption of “history from below” in the peculiar context of West German postwar- and post-1968 historiography. On these peculiar circumstances and its bearings for the project of *Alltagsgeschichte*, see the contribution by Thomas Lindenberger “From Structuralism to Culturalism: The Protracted German Reception of *The Making of the English Working Class* and its Actuality Reassessed from a Post-Cold War Perspective” in the present issue 61.1. *Alltagsgeschichte* soon proceeded to produce a kind of revisionism in the ways that German historiography dealt with everyday life under Nazism. See for instance Alf Lüdtke, “What happened to the ‘Fiery Red Glow’? Workers’ Experiences and German Fascism”, in Alf Lüdtke (ed.), *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton, NJ, 1995), pp. 198–251; Mary Nolan, “Rationalization, Racism and Resistance: Recent Studies of Work and the Working Class in Nazi Germany”, *International Labour and Working Class History*, 48 (1995), pp. 131–151, 132.



Historiography on Germany, however, might also be useful in other ways when identifying questions on the historical and moral condition of whiteness in apartheid society. In particular, Hannah Arendt's thoughts on nationalism and totalitarianism are pertinent, as is her notion of the banality of evil, developed in relation to the "personally insignificant and inconsequential" Adolf Eichmann, who nonetheless derived enormous destructive power from his "participation" in the totalitarian system.<sup>100</sup> Does such a focus on the individual in "power" adequately explain how ordinary whites were bound into, and acted within, apartheid society? Another possible starting point could be Daniel Goldhagen's argument, drawing on Immanuel Kant's idea of "radical evil",<sup>101</sup> which posits total moral collapse fuelled by anti-Semitism as an explanatory framework for the Holocaust.<sup>102</sup> There are, of course, substantial differences between the attempt at systematic annihilation of a certain racialized and/or ethnicized group and a regime of racialized segregation as in South Africa, also when it comes to gaining legitimacy and collusion by those belonging to the dominant group. The theoretical and empirical endeavours about ordinary Germans under Nazism nevertheless offer stimulating examples for shedding light, from below, on the nature of apartheid society and the organizing racial state.

In considering techniques of accommodation the *staatsdiens*, the civil service, promises to be a particularly fertile area for historical investigation and theoretical explanation of the apartheid state. In the twelve years after 1948 the number of whites, mainly Afrikaners, in the civil service expanded by 112 per cent.<sup>103</sup> The state and National Party archives provide ethnographic texture to those who worked on the *staatsdiens*. Preliminary analysis suggests that ideas about gender, respect for authority, and an almost fetishized regard for rules and regulations were instilled in new white civil servants.<sup>104</sup>

Work in the *staatsdiens* and the allocation of benefits like housing subsidies to civil servants also cultivated patterns of consumption underpinned by racialized privilege and concomitant pressures for compliance. Collectively, these measures represent what Roediger has called the "wages of whiteness", a very useful concept for explaining inter-class

100. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth, 1977 [1963]).

101. See Immanuel Kant, "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason", in *idem, Religion and Rational Theology*. Edited and translated by Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge, 1996), p. 57–215.

102. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London, 1996), p. 3–48.

103. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, pp. 61–62.

104. Neil Roos, "Work and Ideology in the Apartheid Civil Service, 1948–1961: The Public Service Commission and the Rule of Regulation", paper presented to the Harvard African Studies Seminar (November 2015).

solidarity among whites. They also laid the material foundations for accommodation, and their pervasiveness in early apartheid South Africa contributed to similar conditions to those described by several authors for Nazi Germany.<sup>105</sup>

Even as a racial state and bureaucracy were being elaborated, gratuitous acts of racial violence by white workers were generally frowned upon. Thus, in one episode, from the records of a disciplinary hearing, a white clerk rode his bicycle down an office corridor and knocked down a black messenger. The clerk was severely censured and had his pay docked for three months. Racial violence was institutionalized in the state, rather than ceded to the individual.<sup>106</sup>

Another fruitful area of enquiry might be to ask how voluntary associations, formal or informal, that evolved around identities, helped to mediate white accommodation to an Afrikaner nationalist state. These places of belonging could emerge from neighbourhood to national scale, and could evolve around diverse identities including religious, cultural, ethnic, sexual or – in a case I studied – comradeship among white male World War II veterans. Through the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTHs), veterans could enjoy the benefits of whiteness guaranteed by the apartheid state (and the NP) while registering their disdain towards a political culture insensitive to their status as veterans and to the memory of their fallen comrades.<sup>107</sup>

Part of this broad area of enquiry, and another step away from the theoretical and empirical focus of Wits History Workshop-inflected social history, would be to venture into what Derek Hook calls the “psychic life of power”,<sup>108</sup> i.e. the moods or affective components of apartheid society at different stages of apartheid history. Hook tells us that psychical time and chronologies of the social are not necessarily synchronized, and consideration of some of the psychic waves that rippled through white society – anxieties, panics, fads, topics of public interest and debate – might yield new clues to the coherence of whites in apartheid society, or alternatively, conflicts, fractures, and moments of stress.

Transgression is hard to find, and certainly this aspect of white life does not feature much in the research literature on the period. One topic that has

105. See, for instance, the more recent and controversial intervention of the German historian Götz Aly, who analyses the Nazi regime in terms of the material trade-offs it offered to many ordinary Germans: Götz Aly, *Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (New York, 2007).

106. This episode is documented in: National Archives of South Africa (Pretoria), ARB 907 1000 /21/1/1/10 vol. 6, 27 May 1957.

107. Neil Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa 1939–1961* (Aldershot, 2005).

108. Derek Hook, *(Post)Apartheid Conditions: Psychoanalysis and Social Formation* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 3–4.

received some attention is deviant youth sub-cultures, from “ducktails” to “hippies”.<sup>109</sup> Another topic is the history of apartheid-era work colonies, labour camps in out-of-the way places for white men, designed to punish, rehabilitate, and recycle as petty subalterns of the state drunkards, homosexuals, men in mixed-race unions, and those who, in the opinion of social workers, failed to care properly for their families. These unfortunates were sent to work in colonies for three years, not by judicial conviction but on the fiat of a social worker. The regimes they encountered in the camps, with the parallel surveillance and regulation to which their wives were usually subject, tell us much about the moral and cultural codes of respectability that informed apartheid-era whiteness, as well as the racialized anxieties about sexuality and drunkenness that agitated the political, intellectual, and bureaucratic elite.<sup>110</sup> Reminding us of Pandey and Bhadra’s points about the simultaneity of subordination and collusion, the men defied the discipline that came with their committal to the work colonies: they ran away, smoked dagga, and, in the words of one superintendent, “carried on with native women”. In the course of my own research, however, I have found no evidence of any of them repudiating the privileges of whiteness.

### *Methodologies*

As John Comaroff has written, methodologies are determined not by the intrinsic nature of an academic discipline, but by prior theoretical considerations.<sup>111</sup> Questions central to a new history of whites relate to the ideological and disciplinary make-up of apartheid society, to governance and the privileges that held it together, to ways that white people responded to these, and to how white people constructed meaning, as men, women, civil servants, military conscripts, or other. We might also attempt to identify flickers of insurgency, however muted and limited. These questions are neither primarily event-related, nor overtly concerned with chronologies. Despite caution about too easily matching disciplines and methodologies, they are, like Subaltern Studies, propelled by a more “anthropological” approach to history.<sup>112</sup>

109. Katie Mooney, “‘Die Eendstert Euwel’ and Social Responses to White Youth Subcultural Identities on the Witwatersrand, 1930–1964” (Ph.D., University of the Witwatersrand, 2007); Katie Mooney, “Ducktails, Flick-knives and Pugnacity: Subcultural and Hegemonic Masculinities in South Africa, 1948–1964”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24 (1998), pp. 753–774. See also Helen Lunn, “Hippies, Radicals and the Sounds of Silence: Cultural Dialectics at two South African Universities, 1966–1976” (Ph.D., University of Kwazulu-Natal, 2010).

110. Neil Roos “Work Colonies for White Men”.

111. John Comaroff, “Dialectical Systems, History and Anthropology: Units of Analysis and Questions of Theory”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 8 (1982), pp. 143–172.

112. For an account of the anthropological turn to history and interest in anthropology among historians, as well as the “uneven balance between historians and anthropologists” see Don Kalb,

Concerns with knowledge, ideology, and representation in colonial and postcolonial India are, as Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, what make Subaltern Studies a postcolonial historiography distinguished from English Marxist “history from below”.<sup>113</sup> Thus, to understand modes of representation and the ideologies from which these derive, critical reading of texts, inspired by literary studies and theorists like Foucault and particularly Said, must be part of a new history of whites. To ensure that this history is also *radical*, it needs to go beyond a reading of published and unpublished texts and the conventions of even as sophisticated an intellectual history as that of the later Subalternists.

The danger within aspects of Subaltern Studies of reifying or “fixing” the subaltern has been indicated by Sumit Sarkar already at the end of the 1990s. Frederick Cooper highlights the methodological implications: Noting empirical difficulties with the Foucauldian formulation of power, especially assumptions about how it diffuses through society, he writes that in colonial societies, “power was more arterial than capillary – concentrated spatially and socially”. “Can the theorist listen?”, he retorted wittily to Spivak and those Subalternists inclined to textual analysis and discourses of power and representation, rather than a social history of power.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, he wrote, the tenuous and contested essence of power

should be a theoretical rallying point for historians: they have the tools (and often the inclination) to analyze in specific situations how power is constituted, aggregated, contested and limited, going beyond the poststructuralist tendency to find power diffused in “modernity”, “the post-enlightenment era”, or “western discourse”.<sup>115</sup>

Commenting on how a historiography tracking “flickers of insurgency” and other instances of subaltern consciousness, agency, and action will yield, at best, a fragmentary history, Gyanendra Pandey put forward a strong defence of local analysis. For historians of India the advantage is that this demands resisting any shallow homogenization. It is especially useful for “foreground[ing] state-centered drives to homogenize and normalize the deeply contested territory of nationalism” and for pointing to alternative political communities and potentially new notions of “the nation”.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, to the extent that Subaltern Studies is concerned with fragments of everyday life, its methods are closely aligned to those of social history, except that the former is less constrained than the latter by

Hans Marks, and Herman Tak, “Historical Anthropology and Anthropological History: Two Distinct Programs”, *Fokaal*, 26/27 (1996), pp. 5–17, 6.

113. Chakrabarty, “Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography”, p. 24.

114. Cooper, “Conflict and Connection”, p. 1529.

115. *Ibid.*, p. 1533.

116. Pandey, “In Defence of the Fragment”, p. 3.

proscriptions of class. Oral histories, ethnographic techniques, and the observation of practice all shape the methodologies of Subaltern Studies. These methodologies permitted the “elaboration of a new kind of cultural essence for India [...] found in the iconic residues of hidden identities, expressions of difference and misunderstood mentalities”.<sup>117</sup> They should inform as well a new history of ordinary white life in apartheid South Africa, although, as Bill Sewell points out, such a preference for local analysis needs to be approached with care regarding how we seek to link large-scale social and political structures and accounts of the local and particular.<sup>118</sup>

Pandey’s point about scales of analysis and the worth of the fragment applies equally to the value of seeking individual histories and their nuances and “contradictory complexities”. This is where we will find the “souls undressed”<sup>119</sup> of whites, and these complexities may conceivably dent the structures of essentialized whiteness. Such intimate studies do not entail definitive sociological statements about apartheid society, but they offer examples of how it may have functioned, and, at their best, can suggest doubts, intricacies, and anomalies and pose further questions.

A comment by Chakrabarty is pertinent to methodologies of the intimate. Reflecting on the history of the Subaltern Studies group, he raised the idea of “generative mistakes”, which are methodological errors that nevertheless advance how questions are answered and how we understand history.<sup>120</sup> For instance, in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Guha incorporated the archaic and the modern, humans and gods.<sup>121</sup> Chakrabarty recounts Guha’s statement that he had relied on his own experience and “feel” when writing this “autobiographic” work. This kind of procedure, Chakrabarty says, falls precisely within the domain of “generative mistakes” that gave Subaltern Studies much of its original analytic richness.

Could similar “generative mistakes” be made for fostering a new radical history of ordinary whites? Two possible avenues spring to mind. The first, like Guha’s “autobiographic account” would be to attempt a sort of

117. Ludden, “A Brief History of Subalternity”, pp. 19–20.

118. In his magisterial *Logics of History*, Bill Sewell addresses the methodological pitfalls of local studies, which may lead to micro-studies whose “only valence, politically or otherwise, is one of generalized nostalgia”. See William H. Sewell, Jr, *Logics of History. Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), pp. 6–70; see also Eve Rosenhaft, “On Geoff Eley and William H. Sewell Jr”, *Social History*, 34 (February 2009), pp. 74–79.

119. The notion of “souls undressed” of whites appears in W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Mineola, IL, 1999 [1920]), p. 17.

120. Chakrabarty used this specific term in his presentation to the 2011 Subaltern Studies conference. Chakrabarty, “Historical World-making”.

121. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham, NC, 1999).

“biography of a people”.<sup>122</sup> Here, the historian is situated differently to the conventional anonymous, unobtrusive, objective scholar. It does, however, offer the writer some intuitive sense of where to look for irony, ambiguity, contradiction, and other conditions and dispositions that will texture a historiography of ordinary whites.<sup>123</sup> The second avenue would be using the substantial and diverse corpus of Afrikaner fiction. As some literary scholars in the Subaltern Studies group have demonstrated, fiction tends to respond faster to dramas of the everyday than history and anthropology, offering pathways into these worlds and the possibility of theoretical reflection.<sup>124</sup> Fiction is manifestly not history, nor does it represent a historical document such as an archival source; rather, it provides invaluable parables and markers, not least to the “psychosocial operations” identified by Derek Hook,<sup>125</sup> which underlie other material, political, ideological, and social conditions. These “generative mistakes” may also, of course, lead to analytic and ethical errors, related to problematic historical revisionism (a question to which I will return in the conclusion).

Finally, whites in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s were generally not diarists, and personal letters have, so far, proven difficult to come by. Many who grew up and entered work during those decades are, however, still alive, making them a valuable, although challenging, source of oral history. The requirement is to understand their world on their terms, how they account for the ways they thought and lived, and simultaneously to avoid betraying their legitimacy while not too readily accepting retrospective justification of how they lived. This methodological balancing act requires strong appreciation of, and ethnographic sensitivity to, the related (but still too often disconnected) fields of oral history and memory studies.<sup>126</sup>

122. A book with such a subtitle has already been published, although the author does not realize the kind of “generative mistake” I am alluding to here: Herman Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People* (Cape Town [etc.], 2003).

123. As Ann Stoler remarks, discourses that speak of sentiment and uncertainty, and their relationship to colonial governance, are commonly sidestepped by scholars of colonial history. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, pp. 60–67.

124. See for instance Rajana Khanna, “Asylum: Notes towards Alternative Subalternities”, paper presented to “Subaltern Studies: Historical World-making Thirty Years On”, Australian National University, Canberra, 3–5 August 2011. Khanna uses fiction to draw out novel readings of Fanon’s famously active and revolutionary “lumpenproletarians” under conditions of neoliberal global capitalism. For South African examples of fiction in which lumpenproletarians as well as those removed from the cultural mainstreams of white life feature, see for instance Jochem van Bruggen and his *Ampie* series, which appeared between 1924 and 1939; C.M. van der Heever, *Laat Vrugte* (Bloemfontein [etc.], 1939); Dana Snyman, *Op die Agerpaaië* (Cape Town, 2011).

125. Hook, *(Post)Apartheid Conditions*, p. 8.

126. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes “Building Partnerships between Oral History and Memory Studies”, in Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (eds), *Oral History and Public Memories* (Philadelphia, 2008), pp. viii–xv.

## CONCLUSIONS

Without abandoning the gains of a social history inspired by Marxist notions, the insurgent ethos of Subaltern Studies, its conceptual approach, scales of analysis, methodologies, eclecticism, and openness to debate, are all useful in shaping a new, radical history of “subaltern” whites under apartheid that incorporate some of the advances of the “cultural turn” to approximate Eley’s “new history of society”.<sup>127</sup> As Vivek Chibber points out in his wholesale critique of the Subaltern Studies project, historiographies that relinquish the centrality of class analysis do have (in his view, pernicious) theoretical and political implications.<sup>128</sup> But, as Axel Anderson wrote in a review of Chibber’s book, the tensions between class and cultural analysis are not necessarily a zero-sum affair.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, while Chibber offers a sweeping critique, there is a strand of postcolonial studies that is critical of its poststructuralist mainstream and suggests, at the same time, linking cultural analysis with Marxist conceptualizations.<sup>130</sup> Be it “post-Marxism” or a theoretically “renovated” variant of Marxism, a radical history of ordinary whites should enable historians to better comprehend the dynamics of apartheid culture. Beyond the South African context, this might also prompt comparative engagement and a renaissance of ethnographies of power and everyday life in broader reaches of African history.

Situating this new history of non-elite whites as a radical historiography demands that it be connected to a political or ethical project. A humbler pursuit than the grand visions of earlier radical histories, it is nevertheless deeply political. It involves identifying the elements of the compound that held together apartheid culture; and it implies accounting for agency among ordinary whites. While there are several possible approaches, such questions might be best elucidated by a historical ethnography of white folk. Methodologically, this perspective is usefully served by studies of the individual, intimate, and affective; by probing the interstices of white life in apartheid society. Following Roediger, I propose that the “souls undressed” of white folk are sometimes viewed with greatest clarity by those who “see without being observed”.<sup>131</sup> This suggests that histories of apartheid-era whites should take a cue from anti-colonial writing, and that, furthermore, these histories should not be written exclusively by white scholars.

127. Eley, *A Crooked Line*.

128. Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, pp. 9–22.

129. See Axel Andersson, “Obscuring Capitalism: Vivek Chibber’s Critique of Subaltern Studies”, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 6 (November 2013). Last accessed 20 December 2013.

130. Crystal Bartolovich, “Introduction: Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies”, in Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (eds), *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 1–20.

131. Roediger, “Critical Studies of Whiteness”, p. 78.

Whites under apartheid were part of a system universally considered brutal, crass and evil, and this demands a heightened sense of ethical sensibility by historians studying them. While the dangers of “transferring theory” are always imminent (Subaltern Studies, for instance, was oddly silent on race), Subaltern Studies do, however, enable certain useful ethical entries into the history of whites and whiteness in South Africa. Firstly, it allows us to demonstrate that there were mechanisms to bind whites to apartheid society in ways designed to produce compliance, obedience, and acceptance of authority. This is not an apologia and, indeed, historians of apartheid need to avoid what the doyen of German *Alltagsgeschichte*, Alf Lüdtke, quotes as the perils of “boundless sympathy” when writing about ordinary people in Nazi Germany (or, indeed, any other period).<sup>132</sup> This means, among other things, that the material and cultural benefits of being white in apartheid society, Roediger’s “wages of whiteness”, should never be neglected.

Secondly, an approach informed by Subaltern Studies maintains an ethical imperative that has characterized not only its own efforts, but also those of earlier British “history from below”, of the South African Wits History Workshop historians, and indeed many other historiographical endeavours worldwide. It is epitomized in E.P. Thompson’s famous phrase about avoiding the “enormous condescension of posterity”.<sup>133</sup> It should, of course, include the history of whites in South Africa. In acknowledging the need to broaden the gamut of those eligible to enter this domain of condescension suspended, Subaltern Studies has made specifically valuable contributions in this tradition. This historiographic entry point enables us to recognize that people can simultaneously submit and resist. At best, it may reveal flickers of insurgency, even among those who belonged to groups that participated in or benefitted from domination. Admittedly, such flickers of insurgency among ordinary whites were few (aside from those heroic avant-garde milieus of whites who consciously fought against apartheid), but they were not only acts of defiance against the ideological, and, particularly, the bureaucratic and cultural regimes of apartheid but, perhaps more significantly, also acts of insurgency against the moral certainties of apartheid history. In turn, they provide foundations for a new radical history and perhaps space for pedagogies against essentialized whiteness.

132. Alf Lüdtke, “Introduction: What is the History of Everyday life”, in Alf Lüdtke (ed.), *The History of Everyday Life*, pp. 3–40, 13.

133. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 12.



TRANSLATED ABSTRACTS  
FRENCH – GERMAN – SPANISH

Neil Roos. *Histoire sud-africaine et historiographie subalterne: idées pour une histoire radicale des Blancs.*

Examinant comment pourrait être écrite les histoires “radicales” de Blancs ordinaires sous l’apartheid en Afrique du Sud, cet article étudie plusieurs traditions de l’érudition historique “du bas” et “d’en bas”. Depuis trois décennies, l’histoire sociale d’inspiration marxiste domine l’historiographie radicale en Afrique du Sud. Mais elle s’est avérée peu capable d’enrichir l’historiographie des Blancs, qui est politiquement engagée, et admet des courants post-marxistes dans la discipline. Ce article préconise un retour à la théorie, et il suggère que de nouvelles sources peuvent être tirées du monde universitaire et au-delà. Les historiographies “d’en bas” ne doivent pas nécessairement être des historiographies qui partent “du bas”, et l’article propose l’idée d’un État racial comme point de départ d’une histoire des Blancs de l’époque de l’apartheid. Il est soutenu ensuite que les Études subalternes, en tant que qu’un courant historiographique dissidente, théorétiquement éclectique et interdisciplinaire, ouvre des perspectives utiles pour examiner la vie quotidienne des Blancs en Afrique du Sud. Après avoir suggéré un calendrier de recherches découlant de ces connaissances théoriques et comparatives, cet article conclut par des réflexions sur l’éthique de l’écriture de l’histoire des Blancs de l’apartheid.

Traduction: *Christine Plard*

Neil Roos, *Südafrikanische Geschichte und die Geschichtsschreibung der Subaltern Studies: Gedanken zu einer radikalen Geschichte weißer Leute.*

Der Aufsatz geht der Frage nach, wie “radikale” Geschichten gewöhnlicher Weißer unter dem Apartheidregime zu schreiben wären und setzt sich mit mehreren Traditionen historischer Forschung sowohl “von unten” als auch “über unten” auseinander. Drei Jahrzehnte lang hat eine marxistisch geprägte Sozialgeschichte die radikale Geschichtsschreibung Südafrikas dominiert. Sie hat sich jedoch als wenig fähig erwiesen, eine politisch engagierte Geschichtsschreibung der Weißen auf den Weg zu bringen, die auch post-marxistische Strömungen innerhalb der Historiographie zur Kenntnis nimmt. Der Artikel spricht sich für eine Hinwendung zur Theorie aus und weist darauf hin, dass sich neue Anregungen sowohl innerhalb des Wissenschaftsbetriebs als auch außerhalb finden lassen. Historiographien “über unten” müssen nicht unbedingt Historiographien “von unten” sein, und der Artikel schlägt vor, das Konzept des „racial state” als Ausgangspunkt einer Geschichte der Weißen in der Apartheidära zu nehmen. Weiter wird argumentiert, dass die Subaltern Studies als dissidente, theoretisch eklektische und interdisziplinäre Strömung der Geschichtswissenschaft nützliche Sichtweisen bietet, um das Alltagsleben Weißer zu untersuchen. Der Artikel schlägt ein Forschungsprogramm vor, das sich aus diesen theoretischen und komparativen Einsichten ergibt, und schließt mit Überlegungen

zu den ethischen Aspekten einer Geschichtsschreibung über die Weißen in Südafrika der Apartheidära.

Übersetzung: *Max Henninger*

Neil Roos. *Historia sudafricana e historiografía subalterna: ideas para una historia radical de la gente blanca*

Planteándose cómo las historias “radicales” de la gente blanca común bajo el régimen del *apartheid* en Sudáfrica podrían ser escritas, este ensayo se relaciona con distintas tradiciones de quehacer histórico tanto “desde abajo” como “sobre abajo”. A lo largo de tres décadas, una historia social de inspiración marxista dominó la historiografía radical en Sudáfrica. Sin embargo, se mostraba poco capaz de manejar una historiografía de blancos que se encuentra políticamente comprometida, y al tiempo reconoce las corrientes post-marxistas en la disciplina. El artículo aboga por un retorno a la teoría y sugiere que desde el ámbito académico, y más allá de él, deben de perfilarse nuevas fuentes. Las historiografías “sobre abajo” no necesitan ser historiografías “desde abajo” y el artículo propone la idea de un “estado racial” como punto de partida a la hora de elaborar una historia de los blancos en la era del *apartheid*. De esta forma se considera que los Estudios Subalternos, como una historiografía disidente, ecléctica en lo teórico e interdisciplinar, pueden ofrecer perspectivas realmente útiles para explorar las vidas cotidianas de los blancos en Sudáfrica. Después de plantear una agenda de investigación que arraigue en estas perspectivas teóricas y comparativas el artículo concluye con una reflexión sobre la ética de la escritura de la historia de los blancos durante el régimen del *apartheid*.

Traducción: *Vicent Sanz Rozalén*