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## THE PEOPLE'S PAST : TOWARDS TRANSFORMING THE PRESENT

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In recent years, the world-wide re-emergence of radical history has made a significant impact on South African intellectual development and historiography. The study of the experiences of 'ordinary people' is now considered academically worthy of pursuit, assisting in the analysis of past events, and enriching the texture of history in general. This growing interest in history 'from below' has resulted in a crop of seminal studies on the processes of the subordination and proletarianisation of people in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> These works are in turn stimulating the writing of popular history, not merely 'from below', but also for the purpose of informing and engaging the people about whom they are written.

But more important for the direction of popular history, has been the profound impact of the resurgence of the independent, non-racial unions since the early 1970s on working-class and community politics. Concomitantly, there has been a renewed interest in labour history as well as in worker education.

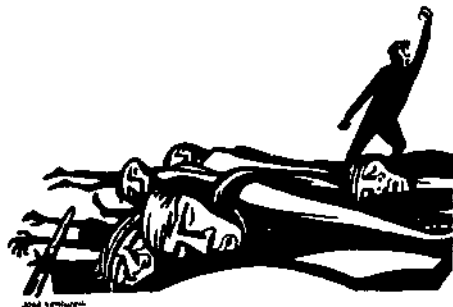
Then, too, the dramatic thrust of community resistance has also had a powerful effect on issues such as housing, rents, transport, councils education and forms of control beyond the workplace, leading to a growing interest in past experiences at these 'sites of struggle'. One outcome of this growth of collective and militant activity has been an increased demand for self-awareness, and an eager response to the variety of popular presentations on history.

I should like to begin this paper on popular history in South Africa with a brief survey of some of the historical material being produced for a popular readership. In the second part, I try to draw out some general observations, broadly based on the material presented, on the state of popular history at present in South Africa.

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## PART ONE

Popular history in South Africa is not new. There is a rich tradition of liberal, national and radical popular history (as well as a vigorous right-wing traditional). However, much of this has been forgotten, or eroded by censorship, like much of our history in general. Few have studied the worker education writings of the thirties, forties and fifties, often written by activists<sup>2</sup> — Sol Plaatje,



Secretary of the ANC, whose powerful testimony against the 1913 Land Act in *Native Life in South Africa* had a significant effect on liberal opinion both abroad and in South Africa; Albert Nzula, the first African General-Secretary of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) who wrote prolifically in the early thirties in *The Negro Worker*, and subsequently published a book in Moscow on forced labour in South Africa; E S Sachs (General Secretary of the Garment Workers Union from 1927 to 1950) whose *Rebel Daughters* was based on his series on South African trade union history in the *Garment Worker/Klerewerker* in the 1930s and 1940s; Bill Andrews of the CPSA and Secretary of the Trades and Labour Council, who wrote a short labour history of South Africa; Clements Kadalie, President of the ICU and recorder in his autobiography of its rise and decline; Lionel Foreman, a Marxist who in the fifties recovered some of our black history in a series of mimeographs which failed to develop into the larger history that he envisaged owing to his untimely death; Albert Luthuli, President-General of the ANC in the fifties, who recorded his auto-biography; members of the Unity Movement's Teachers' League, who focused on history in many of their articles in *Educational Journal* — these writings were all outcomes of struggles personally experienced during their years of active opposition to the class and race system in South Africa. More well-known are the writings of Jack and Ray Simons and Eddie Roux, whose years of experience of teaching in night schools gave them a unique insight into the needs of workers and the

educationally deprived.<sup>3</sup> Roux also wrote and edited the 'Sixpenny Library' and 'Mayibuye' series as well as historical articles published in the SACP's *Umsebenzi* in the 1930s and 1940s; and both contributed to the popular education series put out by the SAIRR in the early forties. These earlier examples of popular history need to be recognised and studied.

On the other hand, the revival of popular education and history programs in the 1980s has been initiated by university-trained intellectuals wanting to put their training and resources at the disposal of the working and subordinate classes. One example of such an interaction has been the Labour History Group. This group of Cape Town graduates and labour activists was started in 1981. In their own words:

we decide what to produce and prioritise on the basis of several criteria; (1) an attempt to cover the full range of South African labour history (2) response to requests from trade unions (3) our own specialities and access to secondary sources.<sup>4</sup>

So far they have produced six illustrated booklets which have sold over 40 000 copies. Aware that many of their readers will be reading English as a second language, the group has written the series in fairly basic English. At the same time, for those who prefer to read the histories in the vernacular, the booklets have been translated into Zulu and also Xhosa. These have had the added use of being 'used successfully for first language literacy'.

Another group of academics, the International Labour Research and Information Group, (ILRIG) has produced a well-designed and illustrated series of booklets called 'Workers of the World', which include case studies of labour experiences in Botswana, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Brazil.<sup>5</sup> The material they present comes in the form of 'booklets, audio-visuals and teaching packages aimed at workers with higher primary school level of literacy in English'. In addition, their written work has been translated into Xhosa, Sotho and Zulu, with the booklet on Botswana also in Tswana.

Another labour history series came from a direct worker publication, the *FOSATU Worker News*, the official newspaper of the Federation of South African Trade Unions, (a federation of independent non-racial, though largely black, unions, and since 1985 merged into the larger and more politically directed COSATU, Congress of South African Unions). The newspaper printed a serial called 'The Making of a South African Working Class', and in this popular history we again see evidence of the interaction between the labour movement and academics, for part of the series is written by several labour historians located in universities.<sup>6</sup>

One of the questions which concerns most producers of popular history is the relationship between the projected audience and the text. For example, while the audience in *FOSATU Worker News* may seem to be self-evident, the author points out that the language, although simple and direct,

still remains beyond the reach of many workers. This is true of many workers less accustomed to reading, and the length of each serial is too daunting. The serial is therefore directed principally at the more literate factory floor worker leadership, with the commitment and interest to spend time absorbing the contents of the articles and who can impart the knowledge so gained to fellow workers in meetings and discussions.<sup>7</sup>

In a country where the majority do not speak English at home, the language level and medium are important considerations. *Learn and Teach*, a magazine which has made much use of historical material has faced the issue with heartening results. Started by the literacy training project by the same name in 1978, by 1985 it claimed a circulation of 19 000. Just under half the readership is located in the PWV area. The remaining magazines get sold by mail order and are distributed widely from Mozambique, Lesotho and Namibia to out-of-the-way country districts which only agents can reach. The average education level of the readers is estimated to be 4 to 6 years' formal schooling, and a recent survey revealed that most of its readership fell within the 25-35-year age group. In their words, the magazine

attempts to encourage people to learn language skills and at the same time acquire deeper awareness of the circumstances they find themselves in, the events they experience and have experienced and the problems that they face in their everyday lives.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, it aims to make the articles 'easy and fun to read'. The method of *Learn and Teach* is to read the secondary material and then do some intensive primary work of their own,

always searching for the personalised, experiential and anecdotal material that will liven up a story and relate it to the experiences and feelings of our readers. Because of the limitations of time — each article becomes a research project on its own — we have tended to restrict our intensive interviewing to one key person who lived through the events we are describing. This leads to the biographical method of writing most of our historical articles — we try to tell the life story of one person and let this story reveal the experiences of

wider groups of people . . . The story on Baboon Shepherd is an example of where we used an academic article as background and the intensive research necessary for journalistic material.<sup>9</sup>

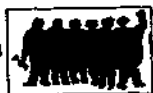
However, a key to the presentation of the material must be the precise nature of the audience, and this question continues to elude most of the groups. In their introduction, the Labour History Group, for example, ask themselves

who we are aiming at. Trade union activists or "ordinary workers"? What level of formal education? First, second or third language readers? The answers to these questions affect the simplicity of language required, whether we translate in pure, "deep" Xhosa and Zulu or the more colloquial urban dialects.

It need hardly be emphasised that the consideration of audience in a complex and divided society such as ours is indeed problematic. Not only are most of our urban working class of recent origin and therefore not cohesive, but they are also in many ways deliberately divided further by both state and management strategies along racial and ethnic lines. Labour legislation, the pass laws, group areas and urban settlement rights, as well as the racial division of labour in the work-place and beyond — for example in the structure of accommodation in mine compounds and municipal hostels — exploit these divisions. In spite of the economic melting pot created by the swift rise of South African capitalism and the concomitantly rapid rise of a productive black working class, major differences of background, culture and urban experiences create conflicts. Ari Sitas, in a paper on working class theatre describes the clash of 'moral orders' in workshopping a workers' play,

both in the workshop and in performances; the "urban" versus the "migrant", the "worker" versus the "tsotsi", the "irresponsible worker" versus the "powerful shop steward", the "drunkard" versus the "trade unionist"<sup>10</sup>

Undoubtedly, popular history in South Africa has to take account of a migrant as well as an urban proletariat, and inevitably a migrant-worker readership brings home very clearly the inextricable link between rural and urban economies in South Africa's system. While *Learn and Teach* spans the worlds of town and countryside, the Environmental and Development Agency (EDA), has attempted to reach specifically the rural reading constituency because it works on practical projects in the rural areas.<sup>11</sup> Its publications are a small but necessary back-up for the projects. For example, a part of the project on water



supply has been to broaden the focus on drought, and an illustrated publication in the vernacular has been produced on the reasons for drought, including the social reasons for its severity, and includes an historical dimension.

One of EDA's major publications is the illustrated self-help *People's Workbook*, which includes information on agriculture, water supplies, building, health care, working in groups and the legal rights of migrant workers. Each section includes some historical background and interviews, so that history is woven into the context of practical application. 'We wrote this book,' say the compilers, 'to give people in the rural areas of South Africa some of the information they need to help organise their communities and improve their lives.' They go on to say:

Rural communities in South Africa have suffered. They have been broken up by the migrant labour system. People have been moved and resettled to barren places. Because of these problems, it is difficult for people to organise democratic groups. We think that the information in this book will be useful for people trying to form such groups.<sup>12</sup>

The book begins with a comic-book presentation of the history of South Africa. It is called *Vusi Goes Back* and is reminiscent of some of the popular publications in Latin America. This section was subsequently published as a separate comic book.<sup>13</sup> The reason for using the comic-book medium, say EDA, was that it "offered exciting and largely unexplored possibilities" for a rural audience, usually inexperienced in reading.

This new medium has taken the producers into new avenues of research which include a need to master visual detail; to limit abstractions — "generalisations don't make good pictures" — confine the text to short chunks of words, and develop new techniques. On the other hand, EDA experienced the limitations of the medium. There was a possibility that people would not take a comic-book seriously. And because the content was so condensed, there was a tendency to become superficial — it became easier to use slogans rather than go into depth. Nevertheless, the comic has sold extremely well, mainly to young adults, and there is talk of having it translated into the vernacular.<sup>14</sup>

On a somewhat more formal level of education is the SACHED correspondence course (the South African Council for Higher Education), an attempted African general history which aims to contribute "towards offsetting the geographical (Europe-centred) and ideological bias of the history people have studied at school". Exercises and assignments are set, and on completion of the course, students are awarded a certificate. In an assessment of the course, the compilers

presented a variety of techniques and media utilized as well as historical skills such as the "detection of bias, which is part of the broader discussion of the (im)possibility of objectivity and the ideology of historians".<sup>15</sup> They also gave examples of what they considered to be less successful presentations, and analysed these.

Also written for a more structured setting is the booklet produced by the Economic History Research Group, a group of teachers, students and academics based in Cape Town. *The Struggle for the Land* is the first in a series specifically aimed to produce alternative education materials for use in schools. It is set at a high-school level for first or second-language students, and ends with a set of questions for the reader's consideration.

At a Popular History Day held by the Wits. University History Workshop in 1984, this group, along with others, raised in their introductory notes the issue of the 'Politics of Popular History'. They mentioned the problems of censorship and banning as a close reality, and wanted to discuss issues such as the 'permissibility of propaganda'. If the aim was 'to produce accurate history with lessons for present-day organisation/struggle', could they (should they) push an explicit line? On the other hand, it was important not to push a line too hard, so that readers could reach their own conclusions. Given that so little material was available, they felt that it was important not to be too sectarian. There was a 'responsibility to air debates, to leave things more open'. (See also Linda Cooper, this issue.)

Another group criticised the notion of 'easy English'. They felt that the question of language and language-medium needed to be problematised. It was important to go very carefully into the motives of using a particular medium. To modify one's language is inauthentic communication, they argued. One either writes unselfconsciously the way one wants to express oneself, or if second language is a problem, the writer should translate the text. *Learn and Teach* and some of the other groups countered this criticism by pointing out that many workers prefer to improve their English — that reading English and history were both valuable learning experiences.<sup>16</sup>

A significant direction in popular writing is the writing of history by the communities themselves. *Izwi lase Township* is an occasional community newspaper printed in broadsheet format and published by Ditshwantsho tsa Rona, a group started in 1982 by school students and members of a youth group in Johannesburg's Alexandra township. The contributors hold down other jobs (mostly in unions) and write in their spare time, for they believe strongly that being paid to write history would bind them to vested interests. In their own



words:

*Izwi* offers notes and views about events of today or of the past. Though mainly concerned with Alexandra, because that is the home location of Ditshwantso, we hold that Alexandra is but a part of South Africa, and shares in the general struggle in this country. We reject the ghetto status of the township, and we reject strategies that attempt to divide it from other parts of the nation.

The content of the paper includes well-researched historical articles, including historical photographs, personal testimony and a good bit of polemic.<sup>17</sup>

The resurgence of 'people's history' has also resulted in the development of oral history. In South Africa, this is a particularly necessary medium because of our dearth of documents written by ordinary people — our colonial history is too recent, the industrial revolution too rapid and compacted to have allowed for the development of a writing working population in large numbers. However, these very drawbacks bring with them the advantage that major events and experiences have occurred within living memory, and a rich oral source is unfolding. The role of oral history is taken up by Tina Sideris elsewhere in this journal, and need not be elaborated here. However, what is interesting to note is that oral history brings the words of participants rather closer to the *product* of popular history than other methods of research.

A rather more ambitious undertaking is *A People's History of South Africa*, a series written by Luli Callinicos.<sup>18</sup> Besides tracing the process of proletarianisation in South Africa, and the struggles and organisations of working people, it is also concerned with making clearer the links between the workplace, with its changing labour process, labour composition and organisations over the years, with the community and society in general. For example, it seeks to show the ways in which workers and subordinate communities sought to make sense of a largely hostile environment, adjusting ingeniously to the constraints imposed upon them, but also at times resisting these constraints.

This selection of writings does not cover all that is being done in popularising history. Nor is the written word the only important medium of popularising history — in recent years, workers' theatre and oral poetry have developed in the spaces created by the independent unions.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, by producing their own popular audio-visual material, the unions, community support organisations and university-based groups such as the History Workshop at Wits and ILRIG at the University of Cape Town are contesting the domination over working people of the audio-visual medium by the state-influenced SABC and by the commercial world.



Furthermore, community and church newspapers, union and student newsletters, media centres and theatre workshops are flourishing (and these have proliferated further even in the short time since this survey was made two years ago) and are providing important perspectives on history for and by working people.

## PART TWO

Theoretical advances do not just occur through conceptual refinement but also develop from problems and difficulties encountered in historical work and political practice.<sup>20</sup>

What precisely is the nature of popular history in South Africa? While there are significant differences in the approaches of groups or individuals engaged in the writing of popular history, the examples given earlier have certain implicit or explicit characteristics in common. These should be examined in the hope that they might bring new perspectives to the state of popular history writing in South Africa today.

One might begin with a few, perhaps obvious, disclaimers. Firstly, popular history should not be confused with the 'public history' which is disseminated by the media, in particular the SABC and the press, or even by the historical preservation societies to be found in some of the more public-spirited towns and cities in South Africa. Popular history is not simply a social history of the past, created for its own sake, or to serve the ends of those in power. Unlike public history, popular history is *alternative* history and has a radical aim, and therefore by definition cannot be wholly co-opted by the dominant media. (Perhaps 'people's history' might be a better description, except that it has a further ambiguity, discussed later in this paper.)

This point can best be illustrated by a recent television series, *1922*, in which the hero — not the anti-hero — of the story is a scab. A documentary on the strike which followed the series featured interviews of white workers (or their families) who had witnessed the strike. Not one had been a striker in 1922 — all had been victims of striker thuggery — but whether those interviewed had been carefully selected by the director, or they themselves chose to recall only what was appropriate, the hegemonic notion of the 1922 strike was reinforced.<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, popular history is located in the present — it seeks to examine the conditions on which contemporary dilemmas and struggles rest, and to trace the origins of our particular capitalist world as far back as it is necessary to go. It is the task of the writers of 'people's' and workers' histories to start from the need to understand and directly *confront*, not the past for its own sake, but present-day situations and problems.



One might argue that in locating history so firmly in the present, there is a danger of viewing it teleologically, or deterministically. But there is no reason why we should look at the past simply as a precursor of the moment we find ourselves in now, simply raiding the past for useful confirmations. Popular history should not be backward looking, romanticising, for example, the pre-colonial past. There is a way, as Herbert Gutman put it, of "seeing the present as an on-going historical process".<sup>22</sup> For example, to adapt his elaboration on this point, one might seek information on the present state of black education. To find the answer, one would have to pose a series of questions about the past — and examine how the process of events has led to the links with larger oppositional movements and developed into the forms of resistance of today (which in turn will lead to future developments). Popular history should enable people to see in past events that there have been a number of possible experiences, and that, in Gutman's words,

things that people assumed were normal in their lives (like smog, or speed-up, or television, or clocks, or racism) are seen to have a beginning, a middle and sometimes an end. When people come into contact with that perspective, they are better able to think analytically about the structures that impinge upon them.<sup>23</sup>

There has also been criticism by traditional academic historians levelled against the use of contemporary culture to view the past — mostly reflecting disquiet over the problems of loss of accuracy, the silences, the lacunae, and the overlay of subsequent experiences to which human beings are subjected. Of course, like academic historians, popular history writers are subject to the bias of selectivity and purpose. However, for popular history writers, the difficulties and complexities arising from the use of present-day culture become, not necessarily obstacles to viewing the past but, ideally, *resources* towards enriching our understanding of historical process and interaction. With the aid of people in the community concerned, the relations of class, race and gender are constructed historically to gain important new insights into the workings of that class or community.

The purpose and approach of popular history writing need also to be distinguished from academic social history. For example, in its preparation and presentation, serious popular history goes beyond a merely simplified form of academic history — although writers of popular history can and do draw heavily from it. (Their sources range from empirical, orthodox national and liberal history; to the experiential and oral history such as some of the works presented to the History Workshop; as well as the more theoretical and analytical history which was to be the harbinger of the 'new historiography' in South Africa in the

1970s.) But at the same time the writer of popular history has to synthesise, to sum up, to pose questions, usually directly, for the reader's consideration, to come to some conclusions.

Popular history examines the origins of present-day struggles and is obliged to examine structure and power relations as well as the creative power of the masses and the part they play in both maintaining and challenging the system. Like radical social historians, popularisers seek to counter history which has been dominated by the ruling groups by putting those marginalised in nationalist, colonial and bourgeois history — blacks, workers, women, children, the unemployed and minority groups — at the centre of the stage. But the *relationship* between past and present is a more direct one than that of orthodox academic history.

In the reconstruction of this history, new methodologies and techniques emerge. Personal testimony, oral history, songs, poems, sayings, photographs and other cultural manifestations — these can be central in a popular presentation. For in spite of methodological, and to a certain extent ideological, differences, writers of popular history give human agency a prime role — even didactic or deterministic writers of popular history have little option but to take at least a certain measure of empirical evidence into account in order to illustrate the lessons of history. The most theoretically informed writers of popular history have to consider "the concrete analysis of concrete facts" and present them to the reader in accessible form, otherwise they will lose their readers. The writer is thus steered by the discipline of popular history; there is no hiding behind jargon or passive-voice constructions or catch-all phrases which blur meaning, nor can one evade considerations of structure and power relations if the readers demand it.<sup>24</sup>

The populariser of history needs to seek empirical details largely omitted by academics. No short-cut assumptions can be made — every concept must be spelt out, every word consciously chosen for its clarity of meaning, every event illustrated and the sequence of presentation carefully constructed. Often, what are to the academic historian footnotes or passing references to evidence in court records or government commissions, could become the basis of significant experiential evidence for the writers of popular history, and are painstakingly followed up. And because they frequently have to synthesise history, popularisers spend much of their time filling in gaps in research. To quote a concrete example taken from the experiences of SACHED's writers:

With academic work, one has to translate from one discipline (historical research) to another (second language distance writing).



The constraints of the two are very different. Academic writing tends towards compression, brevity and succinctness. Distance writing relies on expansive description and a minute level of causality and explanation. Take for example the following sentence from a paper on 'disturbances' in Port Elizabeth in the 1920s. "The conditions and contradictions underlying the upsurge of militancy are well known: the accelerating underdevelopment of the reserve areas; massive war time industrialisation concentrating an increasingly proletarianised workforce in the cities in conditions of terrifying poverty, post-war inflation, a rising cost of living which outpaced wage increases, raised taxation and the examples of white worker militancy". If one were to use this article as a case study, one's problems would be many. Initially, there would be two: How to explain inflation, a notoriously difficult exercise in second language teaching. Secondly, raised taxation? When, why, how? These, and the other items in the sentence quoted, would all need further research as well. Just one example: to describe living conditions, one would have to dig up research which gives details of black urban life in the 1920s; budgets, figures on housing, recreation and so on. Finally, in dealing with the case study one could not simply transcribe the list above as 'causes' of the militancy. The items listed above would have to be explained and woven into the lesson at various points.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, one might argue that a good social historian needs to unravel the throwaway issues, too — and it is the historian who is more sensitive to popular experiences who has tended painstakingly to follow up the resonances of an event. For the most part, however, in the most rigorous academic writing, assumptions are made which lead to elipses, or do not need to be spelt out for a more esoteric audience.

But popular history can be a rigorous discipline in its own right — 'the production of popular history does not exclude scholarship'.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, the writers of popular history have to be particularly scrupulous in researching sources and analysing them — partly because the populariser has a responsibility to pursue careful and thoughtful scholarship on behalf of readers who might not have the resources to follow up the research, but also because, like academic radical scholarship, their work is apt to be subjected to sharp attacks by hostile critics (always very useful for concentrating the mind!)

Another important difference between popular and academic history is the different and rather special relationship which the writer of popular history has with the readership — the communities or classes which the historian addresses and works with — and the peculiar contradictions which arise from it. On the

plus side, there can be a rich, exciting and creative relationship with this audience, for in a sense, all men and women are historians, and it is from them that we gain additional insights. Given the opportunity, we can all look consciously at the origins of present-day issues and adapt, reject or modify their consequences.

But while we might indeed all be historians we must agree with Gramsci that 'not all . . . have the function of intellectuals'.<sup>26</sup> In this country in particular, most people have been deprived of adequate formal training in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, and the populariser is often at once teaching these skills, while communicating the history of a community or class.

This problem is compounded by the fact that in our society the theoretical skills are mostly in the hands of formally trained intellectuals. (See Muller and Cloete in this issue for further discussion on this important point.) Clearly, there is a social division of intellectual labour — the knowledge and skills which are needed to record and situate people's experiences are dominated by the bourgeois institutions of higher education. For this reason, most (but not all) writers of popular history are products of a white, middle-class culture. Yet in South Africa it is mostly these people who have the resources and the time to impart some theoretical meaning to the experiences of the community and the working class.

Radical academic historians are of course in the same position — but their culture is rendered invisible by the fact that they are addressing their peers, and the institution which pays them. While, for example, the History Workshop is attempting to widen and enrich orthodox notions of scholastic excellence, when they attempt to write *popular* history they are forced to confront a different kind of audience. As one US historian has observed:

without some accountability to working-class institutions or audiences, academic socialists can indulge in the "complacent disconnectedness" that characterizes university teaching and scholarly publishing. Like the History Workshopers in Britain, (Michael) Merrill found that his views of radical history changed when he became involved in workers' education. I have discovered the same sense of urgency in labour studies courses.<sup>27</sup>

The obvious question then — how to make resources available, and to create the interlinks — seems to be related to having a working relationship with a community or organisation. But this option has its problems. On the one hand, those working full-time in a particular organisation in the labour or community movement are clearly and directly accountable to those organisations, but their



subjection to organisational discipline must in part limit their role as historians — there are countless examples of arrangements made to discuss the further study of relevant issues with leaders of organisations, or other activists, only to be cancelled owing to the more pressing demands made by emergencies such as strikes, riots, shootings and detentions, of the active world outside.

On the other hand, those of us who are attached to universities or institutions of higher learning have dual reference points — that is, to that institution, as well as to an audience outside. The concept of the 'bound' or 'unbound' intellectual is an important issue for the writer of popular history to confront. The 'independent' writer — that is, the historian who is not directly accountable to a specific organisation — has the advantage of being in a position to explore uncomfortable avenues not hitherto considered or welcomed by a particular audience — for example, the response of the ultra-exploited, oppressed black workers to the plight of the white, racist worker in the earlier part of this century. A member of the Labour History Group has noted that its booklet on the history of the Garment Workers' Union was initially less well received than the other booklets, perhaps because it deals with the struggles of the largely white women workers in the thirties and forties. However, this is one of the contradictions in writing for 'the people', or even for 'the workers', especially in South Africa. As E P Thompson has warned:

a historian has to learn to attend and listen to very disparate groups of people and try and understand their value system and their consciousness. Obviously, in a very committed situation, you can't always afford that kind of generosity. But if you afford it too little then you are impelled into the kind of sectarian position in which you are repeatedly making errors of judgement in your relations with other people.<sup>28</sup>

Somehow, the writer of popular history has to find a creative balance between these sometimes conflicting demands, and this problem needs to be considered and discussed by writers of popular history.

So far in this survey, I have been looking largely at points that popular history publications in South Africa have in common. But there are also significant differences and contradictions which need to be examined more closely. These are closely related to corresponding interpretations of our society, and affect methodology and approach.

In South Africa, where our colonial heritage has emphasised ethnic and racial differences, and is overlaid with the class cleavages distorted by the rapid development of capitalism, the concept of 'the people' is indeed problematic.

While, as Raphael Samuels has pointed out, the 'people' are 'always majoritarian', the notion is also

mystificatory, lumping together artisans and tradesmen, proletarians and peasants. It can show the people as a community, but hardly as a class.<sup>29</sup>

But even those who eschew the notion of 'the people' as being too diffuse, and write specifically for 'workers', have complexities to consider; for in this country, the working class is deeply divided. On the one hand, we are faced by a fraction of workers on the retreat — I refer to those white workers (Britons, Jews, Afrikaners) who, a mere fifty years ago had a proud radical, militant past; who have been largely deskilled and/or turned into supervisors by state legislation and management stratagem; whose unions have been emasculated through job colour bar and protection; who themselves are often individual exploiters of labour (domestic); and many of whose children have joined the ranks of the bourgeoisie, so that they have become sufficiently co-opted to demand consideration as *whites*, rather than as *workers*. (Their history needs much more careful examination than we have so far given it, and would give us illuminating insights into our society.)

On the other hand, and more importantly, we have the mass of the productive workers — urban black proletarians, migrants and rural workers — who in themselves are divided by pass regulations, Section 10 rights and differential job definitions, which in turn emphasise ethnic and cultural differences as well as differential locations in the points of production. But, although they are not by any means monolithic, black workers are well aware of the tradition of resistance, both as blacks and as workers, and a great hunger for both empirical information and conceptual skills is widely expressed.

The on-going debate in Britain between 'people's history' and 'socialist theory' has not passed us by in South Africa. But here the debate takes a slightly different form, and rests on the structural analysis of South Africa — whether, according to the proponents of popular alliance, our political economy rests on a 'special form of colonialism' imposing a crude racism which has to be overcome first before one can work towards a non-racial, socialist democracy; or whether the South African system takes a form of 'racial capitalism', in which a class analysis is essential to understand the crucial role of a black working class ready to take primacy in the struggle for change.

Around these issues rages a debate central to the strategy of oppositional politics: who is to lead the struggle — workers or a popular alliance? For many



thousands of enquiring intellectuals, many of them with little formal education, these are burning questions which, they realise, can better be answered by an examination of history. As one member of the Labour History Group put it:

If people read and understand history, they are more likely to make better history.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike the post-industrial West, in this country there is not the disillusionment with the kind of working class which voted Thatcher and Reagan into power. On the contrary, where the mass of workers are deprived of political influence, their labour is almost their only power-base, and even in times of recession their organisations are treated with caution and respect. Inevitably, this is a factor which must influence the writer of popular history and oblige even those particularly sensitive to 'the national factor' to take the working class into account. As Ari Sitas has written:

There is no political organisation, be it the African National Congress or Inkatha, Azapo or Azaso, Cosas or the TIC, the United Democratic Front or the National Forum, that has not preserved a central place for the black working class in its discourse of mobilisation.<sup>31</sup>

However, the strand of *popular* opposition is dramatically and effectively making its presence felt — for after all, workers have to deal with the struggles in the sphere of reproduction in the hostels and townships, as well as with production in the workplace; a vast number of workers remain unorganised; millions more are unemployed, both in the urban ghettos and those dumped in the rural areas; and many thousands of racially oppressed people do not belong to the working class at all, but, with the revival of the old Congress class alliance, may well throw their lot in with a socialist alternative.

In South Africa there are thus two strands contained in popular history writing at present — 'people's history' and worker education. Both include the history of collective struggles in their discourse; both have a great deal to offer. From the 'people'-oriented, experiential historians we can learn sensitivity — "to listen to people and respect their interpretation of reality and history".<sup>32</sup> Indeed, experiential, biographical and oral history are skills which labour historians are already beginning to explore with interesting and exciting results; while writers of popular history have long been using the experiential approach as a matter of course, though perhaps less systematically. On the other hand the close relationships that many popular history writers have maintained with workers



and political organisations have brought home that people seeking the conceptual tools for change demand explanations; they demand the expansion of concepts and a developing of the deductive processes of reasoning, which is facilitated by referring to empirical work examined in history.

To sum up my argument, while academic debates on methodology are stimulating and vitally necessary for popular history writers to consider, we must guard against being derivative. For while many British social historians have moved away from the history of institutions and organised responses because much of this has already been thoroughly explored for the time being, we should bear in mind that labour and organisational history is far from having been exhaustively explored here. Not only are the histories of many worker organisations of the past buried, but our knowledge of the history of the labour process in industry and workers' responses to both exploitation and oppression, needs to be carefully expanded. Knowledge of this kind, and the analysis of it, is keenly sought after by workers and activists; for many see that their wages (or lack of them) and day-to-day lives are crucially affected by what goes on at the work-place. Furthermore, they wish to explore its connection with the state-imposed institutions which have tyrannised black people for so many decades. These considerations are relevant to present-day struggles and cannot be dismissed.

We have already noted the synthesising nature of popular history. It therefore needs to resist the scholastic fragmentations of academic history and instead reunite history with other forms of knowledge. In popular history there should be a continual traffic between active experience and theory, between the writers and the activists — there is a need both to explore subjective experiences and to locate them firmly in the larger, objective social forces. For the pursuit of the 'collective memory' is complex — we find that it is not monolithic — different and contradictory popular traditions emerge, influenced not least by the extent to which an hegemony has been imposed upon or absorbed by members of a community, as the 1922 example serves to demonstrate. Testimonies are not a simple and accurate record of the past — they inevitably relate, more or less, to the 'dominant discourses', and are not apart from them. So, while we respect and learn from, for example, the experiences of workers who feel in their innermost being that it is as blacks, or women, or as members of a minority group that they feel oppressed and/or exploited, we also need to locate them and ourselves at a particular point of the productive process and in the social structure.

In short, to merely record past struggles and experiences in South Africa is a political act in itself — and to make this popularly accessible is a political act. But more can be achieved. It is the task of popular history to increase self-



awareness through reading and exploring history, so that it can form, in the words of the Popular Memory Group,

a basis for larger understandings, for the progressive deepening of knowledge and for active political involvement'.<sup>33</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

- 1 See, for example, recent Ravan publications such as Bonner, Delius, Guy, Shillington, van Onselen and the History Workshop collections edited by Bozzoli, to name but some.
- 2 One exception is Adrienne Bird's paper, in ed. Kallaway, Ravan Press.
- 3 Jack Simons co-authored with Ray Simons, 1969 *Class and Colour in South Africa*, Penguin Harmondsworth. Eddie Roux wrote *Time Longer Than Rope*, Wisconsin in 1965. Both these books were based on their teaching experiences and active involvement in political and labour movements.
- 4 The Labour History Group's six low-cost booklets are: *The ICU*, *The 1922 White Mineworkers' Strike*, *Garment Workers Unite!*, *Workers at War*, *Organising at the Cape Town Docks* and *Asinamafit! - Organising in the 1950s*.
- 5 *Workers of the World Series* published by ILRIG, Box 213 Salt River 7925.
- 6 The writers of this series include Phil Bonner (Wits University), Maureen Swan (UCT) and Jon Lewis (*SA Labour Bulletin*).
- 7 Introduction to presentation of *Fosatu Worker News* to History Workshop, 1984.
- 8 'Learn and Teach - Attempts to Write Popular History in Easy English', introduction to History Workshop, 1984.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ari Sitas, 'Culture and Production: the contradictions of working-class theatre in South Africa', *Africa Perspective*, New Series Vols 1 and 2, 1986.
- 11 EDA was started in 1977. The organisation, they say in their introduction to *The People's Workbook*, "works with small village groups on agriculture, water supply and other projects. We help communities to help themselves". The staff of some sixteen people consists of a collective of field workers (who are in fact part of the small rural villages they work with), trainers, researchers and co-ordinators.
- 12 Introduction to *The People's Workbook*.
- 13 *Vusi Goes Back*, Prezanian Comix/EDA, Johannesburg 1982.
- 14 Dick Cloete introduced the work of the EDA to a History Workshop presentation of popular history in 1984.
- 15 Isabel Hofmeyer, Helene Perold and Kelwyn Sole, 'Presentation for University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop February 1984', African Studies Course, SACHED, p2.
- 16 An interesting example of self-education which could favour either argument was subsequently put forward by Ravan Press. Phil Bonner's *Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires*, a history of Swaziland in academic style, caught the attention of a man delivering goods to Ravan publishing house. He bought the book and returned several times to discuss it and to contribute more information about the history of his clan. Although he had little formal education, he had painstakingly gone through the book and underlined every reference to this clan, then read around each reference, gradually widening the area of his reading. (His information had practical value: he knew that should he need to go to Pietermaritzburg, for example, clan members had been residing there for more than sixty years, and so he could be sure of accommodation and hospitality.) He subsequently brought several friends to Ravan to buy more history books.

- 17 Other community publications include *Speak* in Johannesburg, *The Eye* in Pretoria, *Grassroots* in Cape Town and *Ukusa* in Durban. Many editions include some historical material to give more depth to their themes. However, owing to lack of funds and resources, most of these community papers are published irregularly.
- 18 *Gold and Workers*, Vol 1 (1981) and *Working Life*, Vol 2 (1986), by Luli Callinicos, published by Raven Press.
- 19 See Sitas, op cit.
- 20 James Green, 1984 "People's History and Socialist Theory: a review essay", *Radical History Review*, 28, 29, 30.
- 21 See also the review of 1922 by Brenda Cooper and Linda Cooper in *Social Dynamics*, Vol 10 No 1, 1984.
- 22 Interview with Herbert Gutman in *Visions of History*, *Radical History Review*, 27, pp203-222. Also in MARHO's *Visions of History*, Manchester University Press, 1983, pp188-216.
- 23 *Radical History Review*, op cit, p217.
- 24 Eddie Roux in *Rebel Pity* Penguin, London, 1972 Chapter 9, describes how the increasingly theoretical and abstruse content of *Umsebenzi* resulted in a drastic fall in readership in the early 1930s.
- 25 SACHED African Studies course, op cit, p42.
- 26 Anne Showstack Sasson, *Gramsci's Politics*, Croom Helm, p136.
- 27 James Green, op cit, p182.
- 28 Interview with E P Thompson in *Visions of History*, op cit, p16.
- 29 Raphael Samuel in Editorial Prefaces of *People's History and Socialist Theory*, pp.xxvii-xxviii.
- 30 Martin Nicol is a member of the Labour History Group.
- 31 Sitas, op cit, p84.
- 32 Samuel, op cit, p.xxi.
- 33 *Making Histories*, ed. R Johnson, G McLennan, B Schwartz, and D Sutton, Hutchinson, 1982, p240.

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