CLASH OF PARADIGMS

Review of Harrison M. Wright, The Burden of the Present: Liberal and Radical Controversy over Southern African History. (Cape Town and London) [1]

by John Wright

The writing of southern African history goes back to the mid-19th century, when English-speaking white settlers and missionaries began producing accounts of the founding and development of the Cape and Natal as British colonies. Their works were mainly narrative and descriptive, with little by way of analysis and interpretation, and tended to be written from a decidedly British imperial point of view. Later in the century, as the era of the 'frontier' started to fade, and the two colonies, together with the Afrikaner-established Orange Free State and South African Republic, came increasingly to question, or even challenge, the imperial presence in southern Africa, so locally written histories came increasingly to adopt an anti-imperial stance This was reflected both in the emergent Afrikaner nationalist historiography of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and in the contemporary British settler history-writing, as exemplified particularly in the works of George McCall Theal and Sir George Cory. Of these two approaches, the Afrikaner nationalist one continued to develop as a separate 'tradition' to the point where it eventually numbered among its adherents the great majority of professional historians at the Afrikaans-speaking universities. The British settler tradition, on the other hand, though it has exerted, and continues to exert, a strong influence on the writing of popular history by English-speaking South Africans, has attracted few, if any, professional historians, and cannot be said to have given rise to a distinct school of historiography. The great majority of English-speaking historians who have worked in southern Africa can be categorized as belonging to the 'liberal' school, whose origins date back to the appointment of the first professional historians at South African universities in the 1920's, and which developed its own particular dynamic in reaction to many of the ideas enshrined in the settler tradition. The liberal approach has predominated in history teaching and research at English-speaking universities for half a century, and is likely to continue to do so for the forseeable future, though no doubt increasingly modifying its pronouncements to avoid antagonizing the increasingly anti-liberal South African Government.

Until very recently the main lines of dispute in the writing of southern African history were drawn between the Afrikaner nationalist and the liberal schools. An African nationalist voice, which began to surface in the 1950's and which was potentially inimical to both, was silenced by government action in the 1960's. In the last eight or ten years, however, yet another distinct approach to the study of southern Africa's past has begun to emerge, as the standpoints and judgements of liberal historians have been progressively challenged by a growing number of scholars, so far working mainly in Britain and the United States, who operate from an entirely different perspective. Where liberal historians have been concerned primarily with relations between Africans, Afrikaners, and British, these revisionist, or 'radical', historians are concerned primarily with the historical impact of capitalist on non-capitalist societies in southern Africa, and with the 'underdevelopment' of the sub-continent's African societies. Although the full implications of the revisionist approach are as yet far from apparent, liberal and revisionist historians have shown sufficient hostility to one another's concepts, methods, and conclusions to indicate that the differences between them are not easily to be glossed over, and that a major new arena of disagreement is opening up in the study of southern African history.

In the past few years several authors have commented in journal articles on the nature of these disagreements, but the book under review, written by an American historian who has studied in South Africa, is the first work to attempt a more comprehensive treatment. Though little more than an extended essay – the text runs to 100 pages – it has in the short time since its publication been both widely commended and widely castigated by social scientists in southern Africa and abroad and would, whatever its merits and demerits, on these grounds alone deserve scrutiny.

Professor Wright opens his work with a chapter summarizing the liberal and revisionist (or 'radical', to use his term) standpoints as he sees them. In his next two chapters he proceeds to give a critique first of liberal then of radical southern African historiography, and concludes with a fourth chapter which makes some general comments about the writing of history. Overall, his thesis is that the disjunction between the liberal and the radical view stems from the differing stances taken by historians of the two schools with regard to present-day human problems in southern Africa. Where liberals believe in the possibilities of social, economic, and ideological reform within the existing political system, radicals do not, and therefore seek to change it altogether. The faults of both types of history, as is implied in the title of Wright's book, are due to an overly great concern with the present. Both groups, in his view, tend to write history that is the poorer

for being too 'committed'. Instead of concentrating on trying to explain the past, liberals and radicals alike are too prone to use the past to fight the political battles of the present. In both cases this makes for a selective view of southern African history: the burden of the present weighs too heavily on historians of both categories for either to produce a satisfactorily broad interpretation of the past. If they were to take a more detached view of the present, they would not only be better historians but, the author implies, would understand one another better as well. As he sees it, the disagreements between them mask what are basic similarities of interests and premises. (p. 93)

This latter assumption, which underlies Professor Wright's whole argument, demonstrates the fundamental misunderstanding which in the end makes his book of little value as a historiographical critique. To see liberals and revisionists as approaching the study of southern African history with basically similar viewpoints is utterly to misconstrue the nature of the differences between them. The author sees them as basically alike in their premises because both: 1) have a common faith in reason, 2) are optimistic about the possibilities of the future, 3) tend to assume that 'where there is imperfection in this world there is somebody or something behaving reprehensibly', 4) search in the past for the origins of present problems, 5) presume to make moral judgements of individuals and groups, 6) are convinced of the superiority of their own views, 7) are concerned about the present and the future (p. 94). But these do not constitute similarities of premise: they simply represent superficial resemblances which are characteristic of the writings of historians and others of widely differing persuasions the world over. A premise is surely to be defined as a philosophical or ideological datum line, in which case it is impossible to see the liberals and revisionists as sharing 'basic' similarities, for their ideological starting points are diametrically opposed. At the risk of oversimplifying, the starting point of liberal thinking can be taken as the belief, sometimes made explicit, but more often simply taken for granted, that the existing order of things represents a 'natural' evolution from the past, and is more or less as it should be, even if it needs reforming in some spheres to prevent or eliminate gross injustices and inequities. Or to put it another way, that the capitalist system which structures every aspect of life in the western world has been, and continues to be, by and large a 'good' or at least acceptable dispensation. The starting point of revisionist thinking, on the other hand, is the belief, usually made more explicit, that the existing order of things is man-made, represents only one of a range of possible dispensations, is inherently unjust, and needs, not palliating reform but replacement by a more just and equitable order. Or to put it another way, that the prevailing capitalist system has been, and continues to be, a 'bad' and unacceptable dispensation.

If, as surely one must, one begins a critique of the liberal and revisionist approaches with an analysis of their respective ideologies, the conclusion is inescapable that in their basic concepts they are as far apart as could be. But nowhere does Wright attempt such an analysis: the result is that he fails to grasp the essentials of either viewpoint. His conception of characteristic liberal assumptions as being about 'the basic unity of mankind, the dignity of the human personality, the fundamental rights of the individual without respect to race or creed, the benefits of education, the power of reason, and the possibilities of reasoned progress' (p. 4) is ultimately superficial because of his failure to place the development of liberal thought in historical context. Thus he completely disregards the close connection between the development of liberalism and the development of laissez faire capitalism, and can make the statement, 'South African liberals have been united in their concern for the best interests of the blacks as they have perceived them' (p. 4), without discussing whether South African liberals have not in fact been more concerned with producing and disseminating the sort of knowledge which serves to perpetuate their own conditions of existence than with promoting the 'best interests' of the blacks.

Similarly, Wright's conception of radical historians as being concerned primarily with 'proper analysis of economic realities' (p. 22), a view typical of the stereotypes held of the radical approach by many orthodox historians, fails to bring out the essence of this approach. As he points out, radical historians derive much of their inspiration from the marxist concept of historical materialism, but their concern with **material** realities, is not, as Wright implies, and as many liberal historians would maintain, simply a concern with **economic** realities. Historical materialism is concerned with far more than economics; it is concerned with the way in which human beings interact with their physical environment, and with one another, to produce the forces of cultural change which act as the motor of human history. This involves as much a concern with what are called 'political' and 'ideological' factors as with 'economic' ones, and Wright's failure to recognize this point leads him into the common stereotype of equating historical materialism with vulgar economic determinism. This is particularly clearly illustrated in his conception of the term 'capitalism'. Instead of understanding it as the radicals do, as denoting a particular life-system in its entirety, one which assumes not only a specific set of human economic relationships, but also all the social, political, ideological, and psychological relationships that are integrated with it and with one another, he sees it simply as denoting one of a range of possible economic policies which has been opted for by a number of human societies in preference to any other.

Wright's failure to understand the basics of either the liberal or the radical standpoint is due not so much to faulty reasoning as to the fact that his frame of reference is essentially a liberal one. Living as they do in a social environment where their own fundamental assumptions are an integral part of the accepted order of things, while those of the radicals are not, liberal historians have by and large been unable or unwilling to make the quantum conceptual leap necessary to enter the sphere of discourse inhabited by the radicals. In consequence they have generally failed to learn the language spoken by the radicals, and to understand that their respective premises are totally opposed. Liberals may be able to accept that, in theory, frames of reference other than their own can exist, but in practice they too often fail to recognize one when they see it. Hence, like Wright, they tend to see radicals simply as having 'another point of view' rather than as arguing from a fundamentally opposed set of premises. Radical historians though, as products of the same environment, have the advantage of understanding liberal thinking 'from within', and hence of being in a much better position to appreciate the disjunction between their respective standpoints. Whatever the limitations of the radical frame of reference, no radical historian could begin a historiographical critique from Wright's false premise.

It seems to us that Wright, and liberal historians in general, could usefully pay far more attention to a viewpoint which in his introductory chapter he glosses over as being 'extreme',

the viewpoint that (in Wright's words):

> 'the general radical-liberal conflict over Africa as a whole is, to borrow Thomas Kuhn's concept, a conflict between two separate intellectual "paradigms", between two concurrently co-existing, but at the same time separately encapsulated and self-contained, schools of interpretation that are not susceptible to rational debate' (p. 23).

The concepts which Kuhn has elaborated in his **The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,** though developed specifically from his studies of the history of western scientific thought, can usefully be applied to historiographical studies in general. On the historical development of different schools of scientific thinking, for instance, he writes,

> What differentiated these various schools was not one or another failure of method . . . but what we shall come to call their incommensurable ways of seeing the world and of practising science in it. Observation and experience can and must drastically restrict the range of admissible scientific belief, else there would be no science. But they cannot alone determine a particular body of such belief. An apparently arbitrary element, compounded of personal and historical accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given time' (p. 4).

On the emergence of new paradigms:

> 'Because it demands large-scale paradigm destruction and major shifts in the problems and techniques of normal science, the emergence of new theories is generally preceded by a period of pronounced professional insecurity. As one might expect, that insecurity is generated by the persistent failure of the puzzles of normal science to come out as they should. Failure of existing rules is the prelude to a search for new ones' (pp. 67-8).

And on the clash of different paradigms:

> 'Like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life . . . As in political revolutions, so in paradigm choice – there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community' (p. 94).

It seems that Kuhn's concepts more nearly fit the existing state of southern African historiography than do Professor Wright's. The arguments between liberals and radicals are symptomatic, not so much of disagreements within the same paradigm, as Wright implies, as of the emergence of a new paradigm. The failure of liberal historians adequately to answer the questions that have been asked of them since at least the late 1960's is the prelude to the emergence of a revisionist school, to the accompaniment of 'pronounced professional insecurity' among historians of the liberal establishment. The views of the two schools are ultimately not compatible, as they seem to be in Wright's opinion, because, as has been argued above, their ideas are founded on 'incommensurable ways of seeing the world'. And debate between them will always ultimately be inconclusive because, for both, whatever claims they (particularly the liberals) may make about the importance of 'the truth', there is no standard higher than the assent of their own community.

This is not to argue that the points at issue between liberals and radicals are always clear-cut, or that there are no points on which they can agree. Nor is it to argue that individual historians of southern Africa can or should be easily categorized as 'liberal' or 'radical': many, perhaps most, of them occupy positions somewhere between these two opposite poles. But it can be argued that it is important for the future health of southern African historiography for the distinction between the two poles to be clearly maintained. The present reviewer would disagree with the view put forward by Peires in another review of Wright's book that his use of the labels 'liberal' and 'radical' serves to promote a destructive schism among English-speaking historians of southern Africa.[2] If, as has been argued above, the liberal and radical approaches are in the end incompatible, to pretend that they are not could too easily lead English-speaking historians back into the comfortable conformity of views about southern Africa's past which the emergence of the radical school has broken down.

Wright's entire argument, then, is based on a false premise. From this stem the failures, not of methodology, but of understanding, which vitiate the whole substance of his book, and render his critique ultimately superficial. This misunderstanding is implicit in the very sub-title of his book: 'Liberal-Radical Controversy over Southern African History'. For all its heat, he sees the argument between liberals and radicals as merely an academic debate. Hence he can criticize the radicals for not confronting 'the mass of evidence produced by liberals to support liberal interpretations' (p. 72), and for not doing anything 'that is likely to persuade the not already converted to the validity of their line of argument' (p. 90). What he cannot grasp is that radicals are not interested in being drawn into a debate whose terms have been formulated by liberals. To do so would be to accept the liberals' own frame of reference, which is precisely what the radicals want to avoid. What they are concerned to do at this stage is not to engage in a fruitless argument over the minor details of history but to redefine the terms of the argument, to look at historical issues in a way which entails that the historian should state his basic premises as clearly and unambiguously as possible. This involves clarifying his own position within the society in which he lives, something which liberal thinkers are not particularly good at because they take the particular conditions of their existence so much for granted.

It is also this failure of understanding which allows Wright to categorize historians of southern Africa into three groups – liberals, radicals, and conservatives – without considering whether there are in fact any 'basic' differences between liberals and conservatives, and whether they might not be very much closer to one another in their premises than either group is to the radicals. This point has been made in a recent article by another liberal historian, Professor T. R. H. Davenport of Rhodes University, who distinguishes between 'liberal-conservative thinkers' on the one hand and 'political ideologists' on the other.[3] Though Davenport's insinuation that liberals and conservative historians do not serve a political ideology seems dangerously naive, his grouping together of liberals and conservatives recognizes their basic similarity of outlook, even if he, like Wright, does not recognize that this outlook has as its basic premise the belief that the status quo, i.e. the capitalist system, in southern Africa should be maintained.

When it comes to the particular points of criticism that Wright makes of the various works that he looks at, he often has some useful and trenchant things to say, but in the end he always misses the substantive issue. Thus when he cites the conclusion reached in one article by Martin Legassick that the Union of South Africa was 'created as a formally independent polity to safeguard

the interests of the mining industry and to safeguard and promote the establishment of capitalist farming' (p. 84), Wright can only see this as 'a kind of gross reductionism that fixes on one particular motive, theoretically appropriate and plausible to today's radicals, which it is believed is sufficient to explain why certain actions must have taken place' (pp. 84-5). What he does not see is that Legassick has hit on an essential point. His statement may be oversimplified, but this does not mean that it is invalid, and to see it as fixing on one particular motive is totally to misunderstand the connotations of the term 'capitalism'. Legassick is not fixing on one motive; he is reducing a historical situation to its bare essentials, to a comprehensible generalization. Exercises of this sort, the stripping away of surface detail in search of the basic patterns of history, are always liable to make orthodox liberal historians uneasy. With Wright, they lay stress on 'that subtle sense of past complexity that is the essence of good history' (p. 58), 'the complexities of events' (p. 100), 'the extraordinary complexity of the South African past' (p. 105), 'the complexity as well as the directness that exists between past and present' (p. 107). But it can be argued that emphasis on complexity at the expense of simplicity leads not towards a clearer understanding of the past, but to a greater degree of confusion about it, and, more strongly, that this confusion has a political function to fulfil in obfuscating the processes by which present-day society has come to be what it is. Any active historian knows the past is complex; to stress the obvious hardly seems to be 'the essence of good history'.

Again, in his criticisms of another article by Legassick, one on the South African frontier, Wright does not perceive the main thrust of the article. (pp. 63-7) Much of his criticism is justified, but in the end does not affect Legassick's conclusion that, in seeking the roots of white race attitudes in southern Africa, historians should focus not simply on the racism fostered by frontier conflicts between black and white, but also on the attitudes fostered by master-servant relationships between black and white in the supposedly more relaxed urban settings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The implications of this conclusion for understanding twentieth-century South Africa are profound. Similarly, Wright's comments on a seminal article by Colin Bundy on the rise and decline of an African peasantry in southern Africa leaves Bundy's main thesis unchallenged. (pp. 77-82). Bundy asks why it was that, where white and black commercial farmers were competing on a more or less equal basis in the later nineteenth century, by the first decade or two of the twentieth century black farmers as a group had disappeared, while white farmers were going from strength to strength. His answer, that this was due to deliberate political repression of the blacks by whites fearful of competition and fearful of losing their supplies of black labour, stands firm against the irrelevant criticisms that Wright levels against it.

One could go on citing similar examples from Wright's book. When one turns to his own views on southern African history and historiography, one too often finds that his misunderstanding of the latter is matched by his insensitivity to the former. Thus he can make the comment, extraordinary for a historian, that because there is evidence to suggest that white racist attitudes developed in Europe before the sixteenth century, they 'need no special explanation in South Africa' (p. 48). Thus he can talk of 'the voluntary support generally given to the possibilities of the South African economic system by its black population' (p. 106), with no mention of the battery of laws and administrative measures that successive South African governments have used since the late nineteenth century to coerce blacks into the capitalist economy, and with no mention of the long history of resistance on the part of blacks, as exemplified in a succession of wars, rebellions, separatist movements, strikes, riots, and lately, murders of officials and police. Wright's conception of 'the South African economic system' as something which has somehow existed separate from the black population, and which they have been 'free' to join, rests on the profoundly arrogant assumption, common among liberal-conservative whites, that the system is essentially the creation of whites. The integration of blacks into this system from its very beginnings is implicitly disregarded.

When it comes to making concrete proposals of his own as to how the study of southern African history should be approached, Wright can only make banal exhortations for historians to exhibit a greater degree of understanding of 'another individual's or society's way of doing things' (p. 107), or retreat into metaphysics. He writes of the 'impressive contributions' (p. 34) that liberals have made to the study of South African history; the 'real contributions' made by both liberals and radicals (p. 94); of putting the past into 'proper perspective' (p. 36); of the radicals' disregarding 'sound historical procedure' in handling evidence (pp. 83-4); of the 'impeccable' and 'first-rate' scholarship of the **Oxford History of South Africa** (p. 54); but nowhere does he make clear the grounds on which he is making these judgements.

All this is not to accuse Professor Wright of poor scholarship. He has obviously read widely in his subject; his annotations are comprehensive and meticulous; and in addition his work has the merit of reading clearly and easily. But in the end it has nothing substantial to say about the current state of southern African historiography. The writing of southern African history has received a galvanizing shock from the emergence of the radical school, and much the most stimulating work now being done in this field is the product of radicals or of writers influenced by radical ideas. Orthodox liberal historians will continue to do useful research and to produce good empirical studies of the sub-continent's past, but their ability to contribute new concepts to the study of history seems finally to have withered. In this sense they are adherents to a dying paradigm. There are signs – as in the recent appearance in the United States of the new **Journal of Southern African Affairs** with its explicitly 'African-centric' approach – that the main focus of argument among historians of southern Africa is beginning to shift from the liberal-radical confrontation into what will eventually be a confrontation between radicals and African nationalists.

As a new clash of paradigms starts to take form, liberal viewpoints will be less and less relevant, and the dispute between liberals and radicals will itself fade into history. If Professor Wright had tried to place this dispute in its historical context, he might have produced a worthwhile book. He has done neither. □

Notes:

[1] I should like to thank Sheila Hindson for reading and criticizing a draft of this review.

[2] Jeff Peires, 'On the burden of the present', **Social Dynamics**, 3 (1977), 63-6.

[3] T. R. H. Davenport, 'Tigers in the grass', **Rhodes Review**, 3, 1 (1977), 26-7.