

The Mythology of Apartheid
Historical Consciousness in a Racially Stratified Society

I apologize for the personal form of this document. It was drafted as an application for a research fellowship. Since then, I have been too preoccupied with work on the Lamar-Thompson book on The Frontier in History and the Thompson-Prior book on South African Politics to devote much thought to the new project; but I have received valuable feedback from several people in addition to those mentioned below, including Michael Burawoy and Barbara Lamb, as a result of which I shall, inter alia, include passages on black responses to the racist paradigm. From May 1981 onwards, this project will be my principal research concern.

Historical consciousness is an extremely complex phenomenon. One's values, world view, and interests provide a framework which one brings to the evidence. Confronted with evidence that is at variance with the framework, a person is prone to dismiss that evidence or explain it away. It is always difficult to determine how far the paradigm is imposed upon the data, and how far the data alter the paradigm. When an organized community has a vested interest in perpetuating a particular paradigm, the effect of the data diminishes. As conditions change, however, the paradigm may be modified to accommodate new data; but the time may come when further modification is not possible; then the old framework collapses and, after a period of confusion, a new one is created.

In this study, I propose to identify and examine the distinctive features of the historical consciousness of white South Africans; to show how they have originated, evolved, and adapted in the context of changing local, regional, and global environments; and, using comparative data from other societies where similar distinctive features once prevailed but have now been transformed, to speculate about the prospects for fundamental change in the historical consciousness of white South Africans and the effects of that on their political behavior.

The work will include an analysis of the structure of South African society and of its educational and communications systems as they have developed over the last hundred years, and an account of the contemporary challenge to the maintenance of white supremacy in South Africa.

The greater part of the work will deal specifically with the principal elements in the white South African historical consciousness. Its framework is a racist paradigm which buttresses the social order. Associated with this framework are a number of myths, some of them beyond the realm of historical evidence, some of them blatantly at odds with the available data, and some of them giving exclusive emphasis to one aspect of the historical record. These include the myth of God's endorsement of racism and the Voortrekkers' Covenant with God; the myth of black barbarism; the myth of the priority of white settlement in South Africa; the myth that South Africa contains one white nation, a Coloured nation, an Asian nation, and ten separate African nations; the myth that South African history and society are unique and therefore incomparable, so that foreigners cannot understand South Africa's problems nor make relevant criticisms; and the myth that the present challenge to the social order is essentially an alien.

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particularly a Communist phenomenon. In each case, I intend to unravel the history of the myth and to discover the extent to which it has been accepted by South Africans of different classes, generations, and ethnic and racial affiliations; and the ways in which it has been used to vindicate the political subordination and economic exploitation of black South Africans. Special attention will be paid to the ways in which myths have been modified over time. For example, during the 1950's in official propaganda the crude assertion of white superiority (baasskap) yielded to the subtler idea of closed populations with permanently distinct cultures ("Separate Development"). This discussion will lead to the question whether so much of the mythology has now been discredited that the racial paradigm itself is being undermined.

Finally, I shall enquire when, why, and how far mythologies supporting racist paradigms have collapsed in countries such as Germany, the United States, Great Britain, and Kenya. In the light of this comparative material, I shall speculate about the prospects for fundamental ideological change among white South Africans, a subject that relates to the vital question whether they will resist fundamental political change in a final laager, as the bittereinders wished to do in 1902, or whether, as pressures increase, they will seek to negotiate with their black fellow-countrymen.

I am not aware of any closely similar study of the history of a particular historical mythology in its changing political context. There is certainly no such work concerning South Africa.

My competence to undertake this task is derived from research on various themes in southern African history, from precolonial times to the present; my directorship of the Yale-Wesleyan Southern African Research Program which has involved numerous formal and informal discussions with scholars in different disciplines and of different viewpoints; and also my graduate seminars, including those that Howard Lamar and I have been conducting in alternate years to compare the history of the frontiers in North America and southern Africa.

I control a considerable amount of information for the central chapters and am collecting South African history textbooks of various dates; to which I shall add transcripts of broadcasts by Radio South Africa, the findings of opinion polls such as those conducted by a West German team in the late 1970s, and a sample of the popular press. I am also sampling the vast literature on mythology, and on racism in Britain, Germany, and the United States. Recently, for example, I have read for the Oxford University Press and the Cambridge University Press, respectively, two manuscripts comparing aspects of the history of white supremacy in North America and South Africa, by George Fredrickson of Northwestern University and John Cell of Duke University. Other works of value for various aspects of this enterprise include Frances Fitzgerald, America Revised (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), a study of American history textbooks in the 20th century; Roy Preiswerk and Dominique Perrot, Ethnocentrism and History (New York: Nok Publishers), an analysis of Africa, Asia, and Indian America in western textbooks; Marianne Cornevin, Apartheid: Power and Historical Falsification (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), a short, polemical rebuttal of ten myths that are current in South African propaganda; Meribert Adam and Hermann Giliomee, Ethnic Power Mobilized: Can South Africa Change? (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), a sociological and historical analysis of modern South Africa; and Crawford Young, The Politics of Cultural Pluralism (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), which includes accounts of pluralistic theories and varieties of pluralism. Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (2nd edition, revised; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970) is influencing my conceptualization of my subject, and so are my discussions with fellow historians, notably Richard Elphick of Wesleyan University and Robert Harms of Yale.

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