

The post-doc project

History and Ideology in apartheid South Africa

Discussing the rationale of the project:

Why is it interesting for an international public in the 2010s to understand the ideological debate between liberals and leftists during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa during the 1980s?



More information:

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Project title

History and Ideology in Apartheid South Africa: Learning from Progressive, Intellectual Engagement

- ▶ A rethinking of the classical conflict between the liberal and radical schools of thought inside South African historiography
- ▶ Providing a more complete recording and evaluation of the historical debate
- ▶ Investigating which school came closest to the truth, searching for meaning in history

Background problems

- ▶ Can expectations to the proclaimed national democratic revolution in South Africa be met?
- ▶ From the perspective of the progressive intellectuals: did a revolution take place?
- ▶ Has structural apartheid been abolished for good?
- ▶ What was apartheid? Was it structured primarily around culture, politics or economy?
- ▶ Was race or social class the major starting point for privilege requirements?
- ▶ To which extent can it be determined whether ethnic-cultural prejudices or social relations is the most important reason for identity creation and discrimination against others?

Aims of the project

- ▶ Mapping of a specific ideological dispute about concrete historical developments – with extensive perspectives
- ▶ Studying the role of intellectuals in the debate about changing the apartheid society
- ▶ Finding out if South African history writing was actually liberated with the fall of apartheid

Wider project objectives

- ▶ To create new awareness of the interaction of historical writing with practical policy by illustrating the significance of the ideological dispute for academia and society
- ▶ Throwing new light on the odd background of the South African democracy, including the economic, political and socio-psychological legacy that confronts it

The relevance of the issue 1

- ▶ Contextualisation of problems linked to racism, xenophobia, migrant work, conflict resolution, etc.
- ▶ Finding foundations for potentially successful implementation of western civilisation, modernisation and political human rights in an African region
- ▶ Impressive results have been achieved in South Africa, but attention must be maintained if the country shall continue to serve as a role model in the region

The relevance of the issue 2

- ▶ Illumination of the left's historical - and possible future - importance for democracy and welfare headway
- ▶ Renewed focus on the use of the intellectual activists' research results is actually a continuation of the international solidarity ...
- ▶ ... with all the South Africans who fought for social justice, but did not get it
- ▶ The relationship between university and society – can a wakeup call for academia only come from outside - as with the activism of the 1980s?

The relevance of the issue 3

- ▶ An up-to-date concretisation and situating of key content elements from the political right-left scale will always be necessary for a coherent worldview
- ▶ Such deep political-ideological understandings make it easier to find explanations and solutions to the current problems that fill the media
- ▶ Too much applied social research is characterised by considerations of short-term effectiveness and therefore unable to prioritise underlying causes and forecast lasting effects

Problem formulation / starting issues

- ▶ To which extent did the history discussion clarify central questions such as:
 - ▶ How did western civilisation support or impair, respectively, repression and liberation of Africans, during different stages of development?
 - ▶ Who had the greatest need for discriminatory protection? Poor whites, Boer farmers or English capital owners?
 - ▶ Were colour-blind, self-democratising capitalism – or radical activism - the most important reason for apartheid reforms?

Problem formulation / research questions 1

- ▶ How have historians' attitudes toward the relationship between - and the impact of - class, race and identity evolved over time?
- ▶ To what extent have they seen racial prejudice, i.e. attitude-determined racism, as a decisive factor for the institutionalisation of discrimination?
- ▶ To what extent have they found contradictions between labour and capital, i.e. exploitation-system and class struggle, to be decisive elements of apartheid's genesis?

Problem formulation / research questions 2

- ▶ How did the ideological debate among opponents of apartheid develop from beginning to end?
- ▶ How important was the discussion for the historical profession?
- ▶ How important was it to the democratic movement?
- ▶ How did views differ? Identification of the most important positions in the historians' dispute and exploration of its preconditions
- ▶ Clarification of the extent to which the paradigms have shown to be converging or incompatible, durable or inapplicable

Problem formulation / research question 3

- ▶ Can a study of the historians' dispute clarify issues such as:
 - ▶ Did the liberal view prove its truth value already with the first reforms of the authoritarian capitalism?
 - ▶ ... or were the popular movement's militant threat the main reason for the democratic breakthrough?
 - ▶ Which were the most important factors in the interplay between economic necessity and political agency?

Problem formulation / research question 4

- ▶ Do the radical school's social scientists stand out as idealistic utopians, while the liberals are seen as the useful realists?
- ▶ Were most of the radical-revisionists actually progressive liberals taking a detour, using neo-Marxism as career instrument?
- ▶ Have the victory of liberalism, national truce and soft consensus killed the history debate?
- ▶ ... or will persistent social injustices necessitate a revitalising of alternative analyses?

Hypotheses I

- ▶ Both of the main paradigms uncover quite different aspects of the same reality – with great talent
- ▶ They are not coincident and do not eliminate the need for each other's apartheid analyses
- ▶ They each claim their own form of objectivity, but in reality they indirectly serve opposing politico-economic interests
- ▶ The liberal-radical history debate was stimulating for both productivity and quality of research

Hypotheses II

- ▶ The analyses of the radical social scientists played a more significant role for the abolition of apartheid than the liberals' did
- ▶ The disappearance of a concrete socialist developmental model has made the radicals less outspoken
- ▶ Nevertheless, the ideological debate is not concluded, but will continue to rouse dynamics and interaction between academia and society

Applied methods / procedure

- ▶ The project goals will be achieved primarily through a study of a representative sample of the most important contributions to South African history writing and the discussions around these
- ▶ An annotated bibliographical database of over 6000 records serves as a starting point
- ▶ The research project is expected to result in a publication of an extent of more than 500 pages

Methodical approach: Why the historiographical angle?

- ▶ Comparative research reveals different overarching understandings of how the apartheid society functioned ...
- ▶ ... and combines this with a study of how leading social scientists have participated in society or tried to change it
- ▶ ... and allows for self-reflection on the role of intellectuals in society
- ▶ Well-defined source material limits conclusions

Read more about the applied theory and method from Teaching notes PowerPoints

Theoretical approach: Why dusting off historical materialism?

- ▶ Important reasons for the differences between history writing trends are found hidden in the political economy of the surroundings
- ▶ Differences of ideas reflect social developments in society in a fairly simple and direct way
- ▶ The main diverging historical schools resembles history-ideologies
- ▶ Although structures can only be understood through human actions/processes, practice must, at the same time, be explained as conditioned by social structures

Further perspectives 1

- ▶ Multi-disciplinary models with methods from history and development theory are demonstrated
- ▶ Correlations between level of development and authoritarian form of government are made concrete
- ▶ Is economic growth created best during periods of free trade liberalism or under protectionism and state involvement?
- ▶ Are grassroots movements and radical demands driving productivity or can imposed social stability be growth-enhancing on certain development stages?

Further perspectives 2

- ▶ Why has the importance of the fall of Berlin wall and real existing socialism only had a modest place in the discussion?
- ▶ Has the left ideological revolt been brought to an end – has history ended, or could the socialist alternative still hold potentials?
- ▶ Were socialist explanations and solutions defeated...
 - ... because they are faulty and unnatural?
 - ... because opposition against them was too strong?
 - ... because they were inadequately formulated?
 - ... or because they are ahead of their time?

Contribution to the understanding of universal problems

- ▶ Discussion of the internal logic of authoritarian and liberating ideologies and practices via theories and analogies
- ▶ Comparisons can be drawn between the South African system and today's "global apartheid"
- ▶ Are moral condemnations of the past meaningless or can they be used to avoid repetitions?
- ▶ Are we obliged to put forward alternative historical models of development, if we persist in executing normative superiority?

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The end

