

Anthropological and historical approaches to nationalism and ethnicity

Black and white nationalisms in South Africa: a comparative perspective.¹

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Originally, my contribution to the workshop on nationalism and ethnicity at the Sandbjerg Manor symposium pulled in two different directions. I arrived at the meeting with the text of a talk based on the comparative study on black and white nationalisms I am currently engaged in researching jointly with Dr. Stanley Trapido of Oxford. Listening to the discussions at the workshop on the day of my arrival, however, it seemed to me important to attempt to address some of the issues raised: about the salience of ethnicity as an explanatory discourse in the 1990s; about the consequent silencing of languages of

Quite by chance, both sets of issues were brought together in a vivid illustration of the 'global village' we now inhabit when I began to revise my contribution, working on a borrowed PC in a Bangkok hotel, with the BBC World Service on satellite television as company. It was Friday 17th December, and the BBC showed a Newsnight programme on the Day of the Covenant in South Africa, commemorating the massacre of several thousand Zulu warriors by a few hundred Afrikaner 'voortrekkers' or white expansionists at the so-called Battle of Blood River in 16th December, 1838. A variety of images flashed on the screen: armed Zulu and trekker ox-wagons were followed by Chief Buthelezi - now in political alliance with the Afrikaner far-right successors of the 'voortrekkers' - and the Zulu king warning an assembled crowd of a planned invasion of the Kwazulu by the new enemy, the African National Congress; Nelson Mandela, in camouflage uniform, honouring the Spear of the Nation, Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC, before its

¹ This paper is based very largely on work done with Dr Stanley Trapido of Oxford. I am grateful to Dr Trapido for his generosity in allowing me to publish a piece which is the product of our joint labours, and a large part of which was written collaboratively for another purpose.

planned incorporation in the South African army; whites declaring a 'Volkstaat' in a small Transvaal town. In interviews the local whites defended their 'culture', their 'church' and their 'civilisation'. One proudly proclaimed 'I am a racist *because* I am a nationalist; all nationalism is racist.' 'What are you?' he asked his interviewer defiantly, 'Aren't you proud to be British?'

Hardly a day passes without some kind of media comment on alleged 'ethnic' conflict in one or other part of the world. Nevertheless, as the Chicago-based anthropologist John Comaroff has argued in a recent paper² which has greatly influenced my thinking, our existing explanations, whether 'primordialism', various forms of 'constructionism', or what he terms neo-primordialism (which asserts that ethnicity is always latent, but only becomes salient in certain circumstances) are all 'profoundly wanting'. While the various forms of primordialism 'legitimate the politics of racism and disempowerment', social constructionism - which asserts the importance of human agency in the construction of ethnic, as of other identities - tends nevertheless to 'under-read the complexity of the political force-fields, the physical conditions and the material relations that inform contemporary constructions of ethnicity, nationality and identity.' As increasing numbers of case studies show, '... ethnic - indeed, all -identities are not "things" but relations; ... their content is wrought in the particularities of their ongoing historical construction. Which is why ... the substance of ethnicity and nationalism can never be defined or decided in the abstract. And why there cannot be a "theory" of ethnicity or nationality per se, only a theory of history and consciousness capable of elucidating the empowered production of identities.'

Although there can be no 'theory' of ethnicity', Comaroff makes four key points about ethnicity:

1. '... ethnicity typically has its origins in relations of inequality: ethnogenesis is most likely to occur through social processes in which culturally defined groups -constituted in a dialectic of attribution and self-assertion - are integrated in a hierarchical *social*

² John L. Comaroff, 'Ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of difference in an age of revolution', originally presented to the conference on Ethnicity and Identity, Rhodes University Grahamstown, April, 1993 (forthcoming in E. Wilmsen and P. McAllister, eds. *Ethnicity, Identity and Nationalism in South Africa*). Unless otherwise indicated the citations of Comaroff are to this paper.

division of labour'. Thus ethnic identities 'are always caught up in equations of power at once material, political, symbolic. .. their construction involves struggle, contestation and, sometimes, failure.'

2. '... the making of any concrete ethnic identity occurs in the minutiae of everyday practice; most notably in the routine encounters between the ethnicising and the ethnicised. The registers of its construction are at once economic and aesthetic ... they are built from a fluid ensemble of symbols, values and meanings that compose a living, historical culture.'³
3. '... once they are constructed and objectified, ethnic identities may take on a powerful salience in the experience of those who bear them, often to the extent of *appearing* to be natural, essential, primordial.'
4. '... the conditions that give rise to a social identity are not necessarily the same as those that sustain it... an ethnic group first constituted as an under-class may be transformed into a diverse status group over time...'⁴

Comaroff argues that the 'banality' of existing social science explanations of ethnicity, and yet their constant reproduction, is linked to the ways in which these have constituted the discourses of the different forms of nationalism in the contemporary world: what he terms Euro-nationalism⁵ which gave birth to the modern secular state with its notions of universal citizenship based on territorial allegiances and notions of a social contract; ethno-nationalism with its celebration of cultural difference, belief in a spiritual charter and

³ Comaroff defines culture here as 'a contested field of historically contrived, socially situated, relatively empowered, always evanescent signs and practices.'

⁴ For further discussion of some of these issues, see also his 'Of Totemism and Ethnicity. Consciousness, Practice and the Signs of Inequality', in John and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford, 1992), pp.49-68.

⁵ I think there are problems with this terminology, for after all, Europe has hardly been short of its ethno-nationalists, in the nineteenth century as in the twentieth.

ascriptive membership; and a hybrid form of 'hetero-nationalism' (in states like the United States or Australia which celebrate multiculturalism) which gives rise to 'neo-primordialism' as its social theory. Perhaps ironically, but not accidentally, in South Africa it is the ANC which has historically professed 'Euro-nationalism', and the Afrikaner National Party whose *raison d'être* has been the promotion of 'ethno-nationalism'. Today, in South Africa, ethno-nationalism has become the prerogative of the far right - whether black as in the case of Inkatha or white, as in the case of the Conservative Party and numerous extra-parliamentary groups - while both the ANC and the Afrikaner National Party under de Klerk struggle to accommodate the demands of multicultural pluralism with their older forms of nationalism.

To understand both the rise of the politics of identity/ difference and to get beyond the (re)production of ideology as theory Comaroff argues we need a political economy of our time, which can take account of both its material and cultural manifestations. He is, of course, not alone in relating the rise of ethnic conflict to the structural transformation of the contemporary world, which he sees as 'an age of revolution, perhaps akin to the European Age of Revolution, 1799-1948', certainly a period of global turbulence unprecedented in recent memory. In the past five years we have seen momentous political changes with the collapse of communism and the disintegration of the eastern bloc has brought to an end the bipolar balance of power. At the same time a massive global economic restructuring has accompanied the technological, especially the telecommunications, revolution and the shift in the centre of economic gravity to South East Asia (Bangkok is certainly a privileged site from which to witness these processes of globalisation). We are all familiar with its characteristics: the erosion of mass-based factory production and high unemployment in the west together with the virtual disappearance of economic sovereignty which has come with the new international division of labour, and the growing irrelevance of the nation-state, as the world is transformed into huge trading blocks - so-called free trading zones which establish new areas of inclusion and by the same token exclusion.

Vast and incredibly rapid movements of capital and labour have brought the issues of identity to the fore - as has the defensive strategy of the nation-state as it attempts to reassert control over its eroded sovereignty. The demise of the old working class, the fracturing of earlier solidarities, intensified individualism and global

consumerism have accelerated the destruction of older senses of community: together with the presence of a rising refugee problem and an ill-absorbed older stratum of migrant labourers at a time of international recession -all these processes have opened the way for the resurgence of racism, anti-semitism and destructive ethnocentrism in Europe. At the same time, in Africa the weakness and corruption of the state, both a cause and a consequence of limited resources, impoverishment and indebtedness, together with deliberate destabilisation, have similarly produced death and destruction.

The causes of these multiple crises are clearly complex, but they have given rise not only to unprecedented conflict, but also to a revival of right-wing politics, in which ethnicity, nationalism and race have acquired renewed salience. As Miroslav Hroch has remarked, 'Where an old regime disintegrates, where old social relations have become unstable, amid the rise of general insecurity, belonging to a common language and culture may become the only certainty in society, the only value beyond ambiguity and doubt.'⁶ Stuart Hall, as always puts it equally succinctly and well: 'What is the point of an identity if it isn't one thing? That is why we keep hoping that identities will come our way because the rest of the world is so confusing: everything else is turning, but identities ought to be stable points of reference which were like that in the past, are now and ever shall be, still points in a turning world.'⁷ In the midst of this great uncertainty, people need to find a new sense of identity - and ethnic identification, with its notions of primordialism and its essentialism - which asserts that you have value because you were *born* a Serb or a Croat, a Zulu or an Afrikaner - is both easy and comforting. Unlike other forms of 'belonging' identity through birth requires no effort. The certainties of its essentialism absolves the individual from having to engage with what Hall has called elsewhere and in a different context, 'the maelstrom of a continuously contingent and unguaranteed, political argument and debate.'⁸

⁶ M. Hroch, *The Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*, 1985

⁷ Stuart Hall, 'The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity' in A.D.King (ed.) *Culture, Globalization and the World System* (Basingstoke, 1991), 22.) This is an equally fine characterisation of the process of globalization and its cultural consequences, which has greatly influenced my account.

⁸ Hall, 'Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities', in *'Race', Culture and Difference* edited by James McDonald and Ali Rattansi (London, 1992), 254.

Perhaps no country in the contemporary world has been so associated with the politics of nationalism, ethnicity and race as South Africa. Since 1948, when the Afrikaner National party came into power, the politics of South Africa have been synonymous with racism in the popular mind. In the post-war world, apartheid achieved its notoriety in part because it was instituted at a time when, in reaction to barbarism unleashed by Nazi doctrines, international opinion turned against the public espousal of theories of race and ethnicity. For nearly fifty years South Africa was a convenient scapegoat for openly flouting this newly established norm. Not only has much of its recent history been dominated by the explicit application of policies in the name of racial separation or apartheid; at the present time the two main contenders for power claim to be 'National' movements. Yet neither of these nationalisms has been monolithic - either historically or in the present.

It is perhaps difficult for outsiders to appreciate the intensity of the confrontations not simply between black and white but between those claiming to represent the true nationalist tradition within these 'racial' categories. Over the past decade we have witnessed a struggle for the soul (and vote) of the Afrikaner between the ultra-right Conservative Party (which has become the official opposition in the white parliament) and a variety of extra-parliamentary totalitarian organisations claiming to be the guardians of the traditions of the 'volk' on the one hand, and the governing National Party on the other. Among Africans in Natal there is a similar struggle over the soul of the Zulu and a contestation over what constitutes 'Zuluness' between the ANC and its allies, on the one hand, and Inkatha, the Zulu Cultural Nationalist movement founded by Chief Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi, on the other. Both Inkatha and its opponents claim to be the inheritors of the 'true nationalist tradition' of the historic African National Congress, and call on the heroic resistance of the Zulu people in the nineteenth century to legitimate current struggles.

Ironically, however, over the past three years, a time when racism and xenophobia have been on the rise in Europe, the politics of South Africa have apparently been transformed. The anti-apartheid opposition movements have been unbanned, state authority has weakened and a date has been set for a general election, based on multi-party democracy. Almost all the parties and in particular the two key contenders for power, the African National Congress (ANC) and the governing National Party, proclaim their adherence

to the a non-racial franchise. Yet this has been accompanied by the rise of political violence and what has been described as 'ethnic' tension on an unprecedented scale.

South Africa therefore provides a useful testing ground for debates over nationalism, ethnicity and race. Since the nineteenth century, South Africa has been a veritable laboratory for the study of race consciousness, nationalism and ethnicity; historically and in the present a great variety of nationalist movements has flourished. Through a comparison of the different forms nationalism, ethnicity and racial consciousness has taken in South Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth century Stanley Trapido and I hope to be able to shed light on the nature of the phenomenon more generally. By tackling the issues through internal comparison we hope to understand why and how national, ethnic and racial identities have been formed and re-formed over the past two centuries in response to specific material, psycho-social and political circumstances.

Precisely because of its manifest salience and because all nationalisms have a great sense of their historical origins and destiny, there is no dearth of books on either black or white nationalism in South Africa, in both English and - in the case of Afrikaner nationalism - Afrikaans. Until comparatively recently, the writing on Afrikaner nationalism was in the main the work of either protagonists or antagonists. While the former have been intent on providing a pedigree for the phenomenon, taking its assumptions for granted and constructing a picture of a monolithic Afrikanerdom which has existed since time immemorial, the overt hostility of the latter has prevented them from understanding the social processes at work. Over the last decade, however, scholars have begun to provide a far more sophisticated, nuanced and gendered understanding of Afrikaner nationalism which we draw upon in this study.⁹

⁹ For two major studies on twentieth century Afrikaner nationalism, see T. Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom* and D. O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme. Class, capital and ideology in the development of Afrikaner nationalism* (Cambridge 1983); the work of two Afrikaner historians, Andre du Toit and Hermann Giliomee, is beginning to revolutionise our understanding of the origins of Afrikaner nationalism: see for example du Toit, "Puritans in Africa? Afrikaner 'Calvinism' and Kuyperian neo-Calvinism in late nineteenth century South Africa" and "No chosen people: the myth of the Calvinist origins of Afrikaner nationalism and racial ideology and its history" both already cited and his "Captive to the nationalist paradigm: Prof. F.A. van Jaarsveld and the historical evidence for the Afrikaner's ideas of his calling and mission, *South African Historical Journal*, 16, 1984; and H. Giliomee, "The Beginnings of Afrikaner Ethnic consciousness, 1850-1915" in L. Vail, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London, 1989); and "Western Cape farmers and the beginnings of Afrikaner nationalism, 1870-1915", *Journal of Southern African*

While there are also a number of works on African nationalism, its study, and more importantly the study of black 'racial' consciousness, is still in many ways in its infancy. Apart from popular accounts by white sympathisers, a handful of scholarly works has dealt with African nationalism - essentially the history of the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress -in its institutional and political forms.¹⁰ Much of this still tends to take policy prescriptions and political rhetoric at face value.

Perhaps even more surprisingly, apart from a short and superficial work published by a geographer, Edwin Munger, more than twenty years ago, there has been little attempt to look at both black and white nationalism within the covers of a single volume. Since Munger wrote, the historiography of South Africa has been transformed. A far more complex and nuanced social and economic history has emerged which has enriched our understanding of South African society, especially over the past two centuries. These began with studies of the process and impact of late nineteenth and twentieth century industrialisation, and came to encompass the capitalisation of agriculture, the transformation of independent African cultivators and pastoralists into peasants, sharecroppers and workers, as well as the political, social and ideological consequences of these economic shifts. Over the past decade, in particular, a series of studies have looked at the effects of Christianity, capitalism and colonialism on culture, community and consciousness. Increasingly scholars have become aware of the importance of individual agency and have turned to biography to enrich and underpin the exploration of political economy, social process and social structure.

Although still only in fragmentary fashion through this work, we are beginning to understand the origins of African nationalism in the processes of conquest and social change in the nineteenth century, its class basis and its ideology. More importantly, it is also

Studies, (henceforth *JSAS*) vol.14, no.1, 1987. For the beginnings of a social history of Afrikaner nationalism, see Isabel Hofmeyr, "Building a Nation from words; Afrikaans language, literature and ethnic identity, 1902 -1924" in S. Marks and S. Trapido eds. *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism* (London 1987).

¹⁰ For the popular accounts, see E.Roux's pioneering *Time Longer than Rope* (reprinted, Madison, 1964) and Mary Benson, *Struggle for a birthright* (Harmondsworth, 1963); for the scholarly, but still heavily institutional/political accounts, see P. Walshe, *The Rise of Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa* (London, 1970); H.J. and R.E.Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* (Harmondsworth, 1969).

beginning to give us an insight into the way the popular consciousness and resistance of the African underclasses has shaped the forms of African nationalism from below in the twentieth century.¹¹ While, however, this work provides a far more nuanced understanding of the construction of colonial subjectivities, relatively little addresses issues of ethnicity and race, and their relationship to nationalism, directly.

Nor is this entirely accidental. The earlier emphasis in scholarly literature on South Africa as a problem in race relations tended to be highly normative, to obscure economic and structural factors, and to deny social conflict. This led to a swing of the intellectual pendulum to an analysis of class. At the same time, the state's manipulation of the language of ethnicity for its own purposes devalued it as a subject for debate or even academic examination. Political changes in South Africa, in which a new discourse of civil rights informs debates about a post-apartheid constitutional dispensation, opens up new spaces for a consideration of the connections between race, ethnicity and nationalism, in a comparative framework. Moreover this comes at a time when the new literature on race and ethnicity enables us to develop a far more powerful explanatory model, especially if it is combined with the understanding we have gained from the previous two decades of social and economic history. For these reasons we believe the moment is particularly opportune for our study.

When we first began thinking about this subject, we started with a simple proposition - both African and Afrikaner nationalism are ultimately the same phenomenon, and they should therefore be looked at together - and a simple visual image: imagined photographs of the assembled delegates of the newly formed South African Native National Congress (which was later to be renamed

¹¹ For the beginnings of a new historiography, see T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg and London, 1983); B. Willan, *Sol T. Plaatje, Nationalist 1976-1932* (London 1984); A. Odendaal, *Vukani Bantu! The beginnings of black protest politics in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1984), and his Ph.D. thesis, *African Political movements in the Eastern Cape, 1880-1910*, Cambridge 1983); P. Bonner, "The Transvaal Native Congress, 1917-1920; the radicalization of the black petty bourgeoisie on the Rand" in S. Marks and R. Rathbone eds. *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa* (London, 1983); H. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom* (New Haven, 1987); S. Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence. State, class and nationalism in early twentieth century Natal* (Baltimore and Johannesburg, 1986); L. Vail, ed. *The creation of tribalism in southern Africa* (London and California, 1989). W. Beinart and C. Bundy, *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa Politics and Popular Movements in the Transkei and Eastern Cape, 1890-1930* (London, California and Johannesburg, 1987)

the ANC) meeting in Bloemfontein in 1912 and that of General Hertzog's even more recently formed National Party gathered in the same place in 1914. Although we have never found the actual photographs, both would surely show row on solemn row of lawyers and clergymen, journalists and teachers, all of them male, all of them in three piece suits, all of them very respectable. Both groups would have purported to be talking on behalf of their voiceless 'brothers', and occasionally their 'sisters', for whom they sought to reinterpret the world and re-integrate its social order. Both recognised the need to mobilise a wider constituency of they were to overcome their own exclusion from the corridors of power. The similarities of class and gender in black and white nationalist leadership are dramatically clear.

Not only were the class and gender bases of the two movements remarkably similar. So was their chronology. Nevertheless, and manifestly, these coincidences were too simple. Not only did they fail to account for the differences between the two major organisations. They also left out of account the varied forms of identification in the nineteenth century, and the many nationalist and ethnic organisations outside of the two major contestants. For both Africans and Afrikaner, as for other peoples, nationalism and ethnic identification were not the result of innate forms of identification; nor however did it start from scratch. 'Tradition' is not so much invented as both constructed and reconstructed out of existing building blocks: building blocks themselves made up of older elements of symbol, language, affect and history, and earlier forms of identification. For both black and white in South Africa the creation of nationalism meant overcoming regional and class particularities, and manufacturing a pan-South African identity out of the fragmented communities of the pre-industrial world. For most of the twentieth century, black and white nationalism have contrasted starkly: the one, exclusive, inward-looking, defensive, anti-communist, the other embracing social democratic non-racial ideals. While many of the same forces shaped both Afrikaner and African nationalism, and this explains their not dissimilar chronology, earlier social organisation and subsequent racial experience were to lead to very different appropriations of nationalist ideologies from outside.

Thus for both black and white nationalists the European discourse of nationalism provided a readily available resource - yet this European tradition was neither unified nor unambiguous, nor

was it imply taken over unaltered by local circumstance. Ironically, perhaps, it was the Afrikaners who first appropriated the ethno-nationalism often associated with tribalism in Africa, as their 'alternative modernity', the African National Congress which, like many African anti-colonial movements, espoused the universalisms of 'Euro-nationalism'.

Initially a response to the promise of the French revolution, and inspired by Enlightenment notions of universal rationality, progress and popular sovereignty, in Europe nationalism was spurned by conservatives; by the 1830s however those on the right politically had come to see the powerful counter-revolutionary possibilities offered by nationalism.¹² Yet which strands of this tradition were chosen and the ways in which they were re-woven depended critically on both the local specificities of culture and history. For Africans, influenced by missionary universalism and nineteenth century British liberalism, it was the emancipatory promise of nationalism for conquered peoples and the French revolutionary slogan 'Liberty, equality and fraternity' that came to resonate most powerfully; for the local elite, the Cape Dutch slave-owners, it constituted a major threat.

It has become fashionable to deconstruct the oppressive 'grand narratives' of the enlightenment, and to regard these early African nationalists as both gullible and intellectually colonised; and it is easy to show that the universalist claims of the British to being the harbingers of modernity and progress were the attempts to assert imperial hegemony. Universalism was indeed the particularism of the imperial colonisers: they not need ethnicity, or at least did not recognise their own ethnicity.¹³ As Ernest Laclau has recently remarked, 'European universalism ... constructed its identity through the universalisation of its own particularism. So, European imperialist expansion had to be presented in terms of a universal

¹² This section has been heavily influenced by G. Eley, "State formation, nationalism and political culture in nineteenth century Germany", in R. Samuel and G. Stedman Jones, eds. *Culture, Ideology and Politics. Essays for Eric Hobsbawm* (History Workshop series, London, 1982) and T. Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London 1977)

¹³ Cf Stuart Hall: 'One of the things which happens in England is the long discussion, which is just beginning, to try to convince the English that they are, after all, just another ethnic group ... ethnicity, in the sense that this is that which speaks itself as if it encompasses everything within its range is, after all, a very specific and peculiar form of ethnic identity ... It is for a time the ethnicity which places all the other ethnicities, but nevertheless, it is one in its own terms.' ('The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity', 21-2.)

civilising function, given that modernisation,.. etc.' Yet, he continues, 'it is one thing to say that the universalistic values of the West are the preserve of its traditional dominant groups; a very different one is to assert that the historical link between the two is a contingent and unacceptable fact which can be modified through political and social struggles.' He cites Mary Wollstonecroft here: when, in the wake of the French Revolution, she defended the rights of women she did not present the exclusion of women from the declaration of the rights of man and citizenship as a proof that the latter are intrinsically male rights, but tried, on the contrary, to deepen the democratic revolution by showing the incoherence of establishing universal rights which were restricted to particular sectors of the population ...' ¹⁴ And the same could be said of black colonial subjects demanding their incorporation into civil society.

At the Cape, British liberalism brought with it the end of formal slavery, the possibility of a colour-blind franchise and equality before the law, however inadequate, however limited, however hypocritical in practical application. When this threatened the world the Cape Dutch settlers had made they responded with an assertion of ethnic particularism: to which educated Africans reacted in turn by espousing the universalist ideals of the British and demanded their inclusion in its vision. By the late nineteenth century Afrikaner settlers found their answer to the universalist claims of the British in the neo-Calvinist, anti-revolutionary notions of nationalism abroad in late nineteenth century Holland associated with the name of the conservative Dutch theologian, Abram Kuyper.¹⁵ Central to this ideology was the God-given sovereignty of the volk, a collectivity of individuals chosen by God to constitute the nation, and directed by him to maintain its purity and its destiny.

Yet as the above examples illustrate, in neither case was anti-colonial nationalism simply a 'derived' ideology brought from the outside; it was crucially created in the interaction of this 'derived'

¹⁴ E. Laclau, 'Political frontiers, identification and political identities', paper presented to the conference on 'Nationalism, ethnicity and identity', Grahamstown, April 1993.

¹⁵ See A. du Toit, "Puritans in Africa? Afrikaner 'Calvinism' and Kuyperian neo-Calvinism in late nineteenth century South Africa in *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, 27,3, April 1985, and "No chosen people: the myth of the Calvinist origins of Afrikaner nationalism and racial ideology and its history" in *American Historical Review*, 88, 1983.

ideology with indigenous beliefs, interests and identities.¹⁶ Most aspirant nationalist movements are led by intelligentsias attempting to mobilise a wider constituency and staking their claim to the future by building on reconstructions of history, popular culture, symbols and ritual. Here again, as we shall see, there are both remarkable similarities in black and white nationalism: yet the outcome has been very different, the result of their very different social and cultural bases, experiences of imperialism and their uneven incorporation in the world economy. Once again a caveat is necessary: unlike Ernest Gellner we do not see this simply as 'false consciousness'.¹⁷ While Gellner warns us against taking the 'prophets' of nationalism at face value, the notion of nationalist leaders as self-interested manipulators of an inert mass of peasants and workers surely underestimates the impulses behind nationalism, for both leaders and led, and the extent of the interaction between them. Not only did nationalism/ ethnicity provide psychological solace for people in the throes of traumatic social change; it could and at times did provide an alternative vision of reality which could enable people to resist their subordination.

The origins of both Afrikaner and African nationalism can be traced to the last quarter of the nineteenth century and to the Cape colony, the most populous and economically developed of the South African territories. It was only in the late nineteenth century Cape that the economic, political, ideological and intellectual base existed for the growth of coherent nationalist movements, whether black or white. And for both, the economic changes which came with the mineral revolution in the last third of the nineteenth century, the consequent increased imperial intervention in the sub-continent as well as the new institutions of the state in the first decade of the twentieth provide the starting point for modern nationalism.

The expectations of educated Cape Africans and Afrikaner that they would be incorporated into the colonial order were both fuelled and frustrated by the mineral discoveries. The transformations of the economy which opened up new opportunities for the intelligentsia simultaneously also led to increasingly strident demands for the creation of a rightless black work force, the con-

¹⁶ For a discussion of the "derived" and "inherent" beliefs, on which this draws, see G. Rude, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (London, 1980)

¹⁷ E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983), 124-5.

quest of the remaining independent African polities and the impoverishment and proletarianisation of large numbers of Afrikaner. This process of simultaneous promise and threat was a powerful motor for the development of nationalism.

For all the peoples of South Africa, the first decade after the South African war when the state was being constructed as a single entity saw the beginnings of new political organisations with which they would stake their claims for access to government and in which they would forge their identities. The establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910 thus created the new political space in which all nationalist movements now had to define themselves. That this political unification did not lead to a single pan-South African pan-ethnic nationalism was the outcome of a history of regional divisions, the racism and social Darwinism of the late nineteenth century and the specific political/class struggles which were being legitimated by the discourse of nationalism. Crucially, in terms of the Act of Union citizenship was defined in racial terms: the inclusion in the body politics of all whites - ideologically by virtue of the assumed relationship between their 'race' and 'civilisation' - as citizens; and the exclusion of almost all blacks - except for the remaining Coloureds and Africans qualified in terms of their property and education to exercise the vote in the old Cape Colony). This had profound implications for the way in which African nationalism - with its demand for an inclusive citizenship regardless of race - was constituted, and for the ways in which Afrikaner nationalists were able to capture the state through mobilising ethnic identification.

Thus to understand the different forms which nationalism has taken in South Africa, we need to return to the nature of the state which was constructed in South Africa in 1910, its institutions, and the divisions within it. Despite their numerical inferiority in the newly unified South Africa, it was English-speaking South Africans who dominated the twentieth century political economy of South Africa, as they had the nineteenth. For them nationalism was an alien and perhaps unnecessary ideology except in terms of a rather incoherent form of white settler patriotism and a racism directed as much against the Afrikaner as the African. Continuing ties of language and kinship to Britain reinforced by economic self-interest meant that despite a sporadic South Africanism the sense of English-speaking identity was based on far more diffuse notions of racial and political identity. Confronted with the economic and

cultural domination of English-speakers, the ambition of Afrikaner nationalists became to capture the state through ethnic mobilisation.

For all the centrality today of the relationship between black and white, for the first four decades after Union, the contest over who was to control the state was thus conceived of as being between white opponents: at the beginning of the twentieth century this is what was meant by the 'racial question' in South Africa. For Afrikaner nationalists the enemy in these years was British imperialism and its supposed South African representatives. Undoubtedly the 'swart gevaar' (the 'black peril') was always there and could be conjured up at appropriate moments in the battle against imperialism, with its misguided liberalism and pragmatism. Nevertheless the all-white nature of parliamentary politics and the demographic calculation that they could win power through electoral victory *if* they could persuade all Afrikaner to vote *as* part of an Afrikaner *volk*, meant that between 1910 and 1948, Afrikaner nationalists were intent on ethnic mobilisation. The irony was that when they eventually captured the state in 1948 they came to realise that they were now confronted by a new contender for power, African nationalism.

Although the Act of Union created the political framework for the creation of modern African and Afrikaner nationalism, it was the transformation of South Africa's economy as a result of the mineral discoveries in the last third of the nineteenth century which provided both with their social base.

In many ways the actual *shape* of black and white nationalism in twentieth century South Africa can be best understood as resulting from the social dislocations and problems posed by the uneven development of its political economy and the disintegrating effects of industrialisation, urbanisation and modernity on older values and moralities. The combination of war, conquest, proletarianisation and urbanisation painfully dissolved social hierarchies and moral certitudes. New classes were formed and old classes attempted to come to terms with the new order. A racially divided working class was painfully created out of the agrarian societies of the subcontinent and immigrants drawn to mines by the lure of high wages and desperation. The size of the intermediary stratum of clerics, teachers, lawyers, clerks, interpreters and traders which had grown up in the nineteenth century amongst both Africans and Afrikaner as a result of colonial education and the growth of markets now increased greatly, although their place in the labour market was always somewhat insecure.

In the towns the white underclasses faced competition from equally poor, unskilled and illiterate black workers who still had some access to subsistence cultivation in the rural areas as well as from highly organised and skilled labour drawn from the industrial centres of the world. Unemployed and to some extent unemployable, they constituted a major problem of social control for government on the one hand - and a potential if turbulent constituency for nationalist mobilisation on the other. The existence of this mass constituency with its raw experiences of proletarianisation, fresh from their humiliating encounters with British imperialism and their brutal confrontations with Africans with whom they competed on the land goes a long way to explaining the anti-imperialism and the racism of twentieth century Afrikaner nationalism - although there has been remarkably little systematic study of the nature of Afrikaner popular consciousness, or its impact on the Afrikaner elite.

In the search for security, new identities began to take shape. Faced by the new uncertainties, many turned to what Ben Anderson has termed 'new imagined communities', the 'nation' within which were experienced the unifying sentiments of 'a deep horizontal comradeship'. Because of the national and racial form of capitalist development in South Africa, the glaring inequalities and ruthless exploitations of the new social order were not necessarily met by forms of class consciousness and class action - although these were by no means absent. Instead, they were experienced and articulated in ways which frequently cut across class, and which gave rise to newly created and passionately felt bonds of 'community' and 'brotherhood'. As in other parts of Africa - and among Afrikaner and Africans, newly forged ethnicities and locally based loyalties provided defences in these profoundly new circumstances, to some extent softening the rupture they represented.

Nevertheless, in South Africa, the church and religion have been far more important than the 'tribe' in defining 'a language of civic virtue' for both black and white - albeit in different ways. Nationalist discourse for both has drawn on religious imagery, although it was left to the 20th century Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) to underpin Afrikaner nationalism with notions of Divine intervention in the creation of the Afrikaner people and with a programme of action which ensure fulfilment of God's purpose through Christian national education. This did not mean that Afrikaner were a peculiarly religious people as they are sometimes

portrayed. Contrary to a conventional wisdom which sees Afrikaner nationalism as the peculiar product of seventeenth century Calvinism further purified on the Cape frontier, as Andre du Toit has recently shown, neo-Calvinism was only brought to South Africa in the late nineteenth century, and in the early twentieth century the DRC had to engage in a quite deliberate offensive to win back their congregants who were being seduced away from the church by apostolic sects and secular alternatives. Nevertheless, the fact that the majority of Afrikaner were members of variants of the Dutch Reformed Church undoubtedly lessened the task of the moral and ideological brokers of Afrikaner nationalism, and laid the basis for the establishment of what Dunbar Moodie, following George Mosse's characterisation of National Socialism, calls the Afrikaner civil religion.

For Africans, divided amongst a variety of Christian denominations, matters were never so simple, although the first African nationalists were also drawn from the educated Christian intelligentsia, and were also often clerics and teachers. For Africans as for Afrikaner it was the church that brought literacy and contact with the outside world. And it was through literacy that European ideas of nationalism were transmitted across the globe before being transformed to meet local circumstance. Missionaries played an important role in mediating ideas of African unity in terms of the 'nation'.¹⁸ At the same time, the tensions between the universality of the Christian message and the ambiguities of Christian practice in a settler society had already been deeply felt during the wars of conquest particularly although not solely in the Eastern Cape. From the late nineteenth century, the churches, especially those which broke away from orthodox mission organisations, became a primary vehicle for the expression of a variety of African aspirations, some of them profoundly conservative, others equally deeply subversive of the values of the South African state. Unifying the independent churches remained a major goal of the African Congress well into the 1940s as part of their nationalist objective. And this was so because many of the leaders of Congress were themselves devout churchmen - still a significant feature of the mass democratic move-

¹⁸ As early as 1867, for example, the Rev Ludorf, missionary to the southern Tswana Tshidi Rolong people was urging unity on the southern Tswana chiefs in the face of Boer and British claims to the diamondiferous territory which was to become Griqualand West. At the same time as representing Tswana claims to the territory, Ludorf was 'drafting a manifesto and constitution for a "United Barolong, Batlhaping and Bangwaketse Nation".'

ment to this day. Religious discourse is as firmly imprinted in African nationalist texts as in Afrikaner texts.

Like religion, language is often regarded as the hallmark of nationalism. Yet amongst both Africans and Afrikaner the use of a vernacular to mobilise has been neither straightforward nor automatic. For Africans, the vernacular languages divided rather than unified, and in the nineteenth century the African intelligentsia was distinguished by its ability to use English, a language which transcended colonial and ethnic boundaries. Although the mass of Africans continued to speak the local idiom, for the nationalist movement it was English which became the lingua franca, a reflection of the pan South African character of the intelligentsia. Thus, in a revealing passage in his diary, the black American anthropologist (and later US representative at the UN) Ralph Bunche who visited South Africa in 1937 and attended a number of black political conferences, recorded:

There was a repeated apology of speakers at the Convention, Congress and the Women's Council when they made the following announcement before they began, "This is an African meeting and I will lose my mother's tongue."

To meet the needs of a pan-South African organisation a pan-South African language was needed, and perforce this had to be English. By the 1950s, the black intelligentsia of Sophiatown were experimenting with their own form of English, which they felt "could carry the weight of the new African urban experience in a way that vernacular languages could not". As yet we know little of the implications this had for oral culture, or for the interaction of this bilingual intelligentsia with their constituency: certainly there seems to have been a marked disjuncture between the somewhat stilted and formal language of African nationalist rhetoric in English employed in the many petitions to government and even the speeches in English reported in the white press - and the richly flowing rhetoric lovingly playing on indigenous symbolism and redolent of local historical experience in vernacular addresses to rural audiences.¹⁹

As in religion, so in some ways Afrikaner nationalists had an easier time constructing a single language of national mobilisation, although this is a more recent phenomenon than most outsiders

¹⁹ Apart from pioneering work by Andre Odendaal and Peter Delius.

appreciate. It was only in 1925 that the bible was finally translated into Afrikaans and that the language was recognised as South Africa's second official language. Largely a twentieth century construct, Afrikaans grew out of a patois which until the late nineteenth century was associated with the labouring poor of town and countryside. Despite efforts in the 1880s, it was only in the second decade of the twentieth century that the second language movement was able to reconstruct the Afrikaans vernaculars, eliminating those elements reflecting its origins among the lower orders. This generation of cultural nationalists manipulated the language and its literature to suit their cultural-cum-political tasks. In so doing, they were concerned not only to transform the language but also to shape the entire cultural identity of the Dutch-Afrikaans population.

The Afrikaner National Party probably owed its success in 1948 to its ability to unify divergent class forces, on an ethnic and racist ticket. Ironically, however, the ideology of ethnic exclusivity was in the long run to prove a straitjacket, and today threatens its very existence. As the exigencies of continued control demanded first the incorporation into the National Party of English-speakers - something which the declaration of a Republic in 1960 was intended to facilitate - and then the incorporation of Indians and Coloureds and possibly even urban Africans, so the narrow ethnic base of the ruling party was seen increasingly as a source of instability.

Confronted with the rising tide of internal opposition and external pressure, the Afrikaner National Party attempted to switch from a discourse of ethnic nationalism to a technicist discourse of capitalist rationality and development: from the late 1970s in place of apartheid orthodoxy and the rhetoric of the chosen people, came new catchwords such as "realism", "Pragmatism", "reform and "effective government. This new apolitical language found it hard to compete with the language of the volk; racist and nationalist ideologies which had been so internalised by Afrikaner could not be easily discarded. It fitted ill with the entire trajectory of Afrikaner nationalist ideology. Not surprisingly, from being an apparently monolithic and united front in the 1950s and 1950s, over the past twenty years Afrikaner nationalism has fragmented between the mainstream National Party, the Conservative Party and a variety of extra-parliamentary nazi-inspired organisations all struggling for the soul of the volk. The weakness of the National Party among its erstwhile constituents is palpable, and this in part explains its need

to look, for the first time, for a non-racial alliance among Afrikaans speaking Coloureds, but also among English-speaking white and Indian voters.

For Africans the experience has been quite opposite. As a result of the state's policies of defining access to resources by race, through most of the twentieth century, the African middle class has faced a continual process of downward pressure. This is not to deny that there have been conservatives within the African intelligentsia, anxious to collaborate with the state, and a constant tension between more and less radical wings of the nationalist organisations. The links between the African elite organised in the first decades of the century in the South African Native Congress and the African peasants and workers on whose behalf they purported to speak were often tenuous. And the segregationist state, like its successor, the apartheid state, created the institutional bases and patronage networks to under-gird ethnic identification. Yet for the African petty bourgeoisie as a class ethnic identification has never been straightforward, the rewards at least until comparatively recently have been too meagre, the punishments too high for an enthusiastic embrace of the ethnic alternative.

From the very outset, the South African Native National Congress saw its goal in forging a pan-ethnic African nationalism. Given its pan-South African character and its numerical weakness it could hardly do otherwise.²⁰ Moreover even in the first decade of the century, in the protests against the nature of the Union constitution, Coloured and African leaders had come together - a prospect of unity which was periodically to haunt the white rulers of South Africa. In 1937 Ralph Bunche noted how in the discussions over the name for the recently formed National Council of African Women, 'One speaker from the Cape made an appeal for keeping the doors open to all non-European women and was glad the term African instead of Bantu was adopted in the name of the organisation'. The

²⁰ * Among the objectives of the first constitution of the SANNC in September 1919 contained two clauses advocating a pan-tribal organisation:

6) To encourage mutual understanding and to bring together into common action as one political people all tribes and clans of various tribes or races and by means of combined effort and united political organisation to defend their freedom, rights and privileges;

7) To discourage and contend against racialism and tribal feuds; jealousy and petty quarrels by economic combination, education, goodwill and by other means"

incorporationist ethic of African societies and the fluidity of ethnic boundaries among Africans may well have facilitated this.²¹

Equally importantly, to counter the racial policies of the settler state, African nationalism drew from one strand within imperial thinking a liberal incorporationist ethic which led to the emergence of a broad non-racial nationalism that was to be very different in its implications for the future of South Africa. The racially exclusive nature of the South African state meant that they could not win power through the ballot box, or through an appeal to an exclusive ethnic group. For the new elite of western educated Africans, excluded from the body politic at union, it was therefore older imperial notions of incorporation premised on an alliance with whites, that permeated political thought.

The claim has therefore been for incorporation in a unitary, non-racial, democratic state: at most the demands of social democracy. Nevertheless, as they found their attempts in the first fifty years of this century at even limited incorporation rejected, middle class leaders were radicalised. Their structural vulnerability and the intimacy forged by their shared racial oppression meant that there have always been significant sections of the African petty bourgeoisie that were open to more radical ideas, whether from the African militant opposition of the nineteenth century, left-wing intellectuals, both socialist and communist, or American Garveyites. As their constituency came to include the increasingly urbanised working class from the late 1930s, they strove to speak on behalf of all blacks, if only to increase their own constituency and credibility. The prolonged campaigns against state policies in the 1950s, in alliance with white progressives and the outlawed Communist Party, the banning of black nationalist organisations in 1960, and the decisions to go underground and engage in sabotage and armed struggle have all sharpened the radicalism the Congress movement. They have also increased rather than decreased its commitment to a non-racist future in South Africa.

Of course we are not suggesting that this process has not been unproblematic: the tensions in Natal between Africans and Indians which manifested in ugly race riots in 1949 and more recently in

²¹ Cf the way in which the Amakholwa of Natal for example who are of Sotho and Swazi descent are referring to themselves as Zulu "of Sesotho [sic] origin" by the beginning of the twentieth century. Stephen Mini asked before the SC on Native Affairs what tribe he and his fellow representatives of the NNC (incl. JT Gumede and Abner Mtimkulu) belong to - answers "The Christian tribe of Edendale, asked what race - answers "Zulu".

Inanda in 1985; the breakaway of the Africanists from the ANC to form the PAC in 1969; and the rise of ethnic nationalisms in the state-created Bantustans forbid an easy optimism. The ruthlessness with which black opposition is currently being subjugated is undoubtedly sowing a harvest of hatred of the white man and all his works, and there is, as we have seen, a growing impatience among township youth with the negotiating stance of the ANC. And all nationalisms, perhaps all mass movements, contain the seeds of totalitarianism in their midst. Nevertheless what is in many ways remarkable is the continued hegemony of ideals of non-racialism and pan-tribalism in South Africa today.

As the above paragraphs illustrate, in South Africa, the discourses of nationalism, race and ethnicity have multiple and complex determinations.

As elsewhere, there is constant slippage between the terms: frequently and increasingly, the terms are used interchangeably. If in the past tribalism, ethnicity, nationalism and race constituted discrete if relationally constructed 'hierarchies of nesting identities', in the post-contemporary world ethno-nationalists all appear to demand their own, culturally homogenous 'nation-state' - ironically as the very foundations of the nineteenth century nation-state are everywhere being eroded.²² This convergence is matched - as the Paxman interview cited above vividly revealed - by a similar convergence between biological and cultural difference. Legally defined citizenship (nationalism), culture (ethnicity) and purported biological difference (race) have provided different ways in which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion have been drawn historically. Indeed Saul Dubow has recently argued, as has Aletta Norval, that Afrikaners, with their intellectual roots in neo-Calvinist notions of the divine sovereignty of nations, rarely used the language of biological inferiority, even in the 1930s, perhaps because the entire discourse of social Darwinism was alien. As the above suggests, both ethnic and nation may claim a common racial origin. They may ascribe their difference in terms of assumed biological difference and draw boundaries around themselves in these terms. But this is not intrinsic to the definition. Today we tend to think of ethnicity as self-imposed and 'race' as imposed by outsiders, as Michael Banton has suggested; but in the nineteenth century it was the English who categorised themselves as the ruling race - as Cecil Rhodes

²² Comaroff, 'Ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of difference'.

remarked, while walking across the South African veld, 'As I walked, I looked up at the sky and down at the earth, and I said to myself this should be British. And it came to me in that fine, exhilarating air, that the British were the best race to rule the world.' Lord Milner similarly proudly described himself as a 'British race patriot'.

The slippage between race, ethnic group and nation has a good deal to do with the hegemony of biology and the full-blown scientific racism which dominated so much of European thought between the 1840s and 1940s, and which held 'that race was one of the principal determinants of attitudes endowments, capabilities, and inherent tendencies among human beings. Race thus seemed to determine the course of human history.' By race was meant a particular genetic endowment, which predicted not only physical appearance but also moral character. The physical differences could however be as much imagined as actual: in the late nineteenth century, Jews, prostitutes and criminals were all assumed to be racially different, to be of different 'biological stock', and their phenotypical difference was then 'constructed'; drawing on those popular sciences of the nineteenth century, physiognomy and phrenology. Thus, modern European anti-semitism is directly linked to the idea of race. According to its theorists, the Jews 'had always been and would always be endowed with a pernicious *essence* transmitted genetically just like the colour of hair or blood group.'²³

The difference between biological 'race' and other modes of boundary drawing is often believed to be its in-escapability. And of course in so far as the distinctions are being based on perceptible differences such as skin colour they seem even more inescapable - which is why assimilation has always been an easier option for Jews than for blacks. But while skin colour difference is in one sense a visible marker - it is not indispensable. As Sander Gilman has remarked, 'It is a truism that skin colour has mythic qualities ... That blacks are the antithesis of the mirage of whiteness the ideal of European aesthetic values, strikes the reader as an extension of some "real" perceived difference to which the qualities of good and "bad" have been erroneously applied. The very concept of colour is a quality of Otherness, not of reality. For not only are blacks black in this amorphous world of projection, so too are Jews', an association

²³ M. Rodinson, 'A few thoughts on anti-semitism', in his *Cult, Ghetto and state. The persistence of the Jewish Question* (London 1983), p. 173.

that goes back to medieval iconography.²⁴ Nor should we assume that the differences between black and white are so clear cut, do not involve a fair amount of imagining. Quite clearly the terms black and white cover an infinite variety of light and dark skin tones, and the categories are largely social rather than natural.²⁵

Thus, whatever the definitions, in reality the categories can be extraordinarily blurred - does the Inkatha movement in South Africa today represent a form of ethnic mobilisation, or nationalism? Was the Afrikaner Broederbond with its call to the volk, its ambition to control the state and its demand for racial separation a national, ethnic or racist movement? Since the 1940s - when the idea of scientific racism was thought to be totally discredited by the horrifying events of the holocaust - the dominance of biology has of course passed out of fashion, at least in educated circles and in western Europe; there has been a shift instead into the language of culture. Paul Gilroy has argued - in what, to my mind is the most interesting and provocative work in the field - that in Britain the 'new racism' - a phenomenon he and other members of the Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham have related to the struggle within the Tory Party between 1964 and 1970 and especially the reconstitution of the party under Thatcher - is distinguished by its capacity to 'link discourses of patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia,

²⁴ Sander L Gilman, *Disease and Representation, Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS* (Ithaca and London, 1988), 30-1. See also his *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca, 1985). Hechter also cites the case of the Irish who were frequently regarded as racially inferior in the nineteenth century, though the lack of a colour difference was seen as somewhat puzzling. Charles Kingsley, for example, describing a visit to western Ireland remarked:

... I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. I don't believe they are our fault. I believe there are not only many more of them than of old, but they are happier, better and more comfortably fed and lodged under our rule than they ever were. But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours ... (Cited in M. Hechter, *Internal Colonialism. The Celtic fringe in British national development, 1536-1966* [London, 1975], p xvii).

²⁵ Cf Stuart Hall, talking of the category of 'Black in contemporary Britain and the fact that no-one described themselves as "Black" in the Jamaica of his childhood: 'Black is not a question of pigmentation. The Black I'm talking about is a historical category, a political category, a cultural category. In our language, at certain historical moments, we have to use the signifier. We have to create an equivalence between how people look and what their histories are. Their histories as in the past, inscribed in their skins. But it is not because of their skins that they are Black in their heads.' ('Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities', in King, *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, p.53.

Englishness, Britishness, militarism and gender difference into a complex system which gives "race" its contemporary meaning.' What he terms 'the new racism' thus specifies who may legitimately belong to the national community and simultaneously advances reasons for the segregation or banishment of those whose origin, sentiment or citizenship assigns them elsewhere ...' Theoretically, of course it is easier to challenge exclusion on the grounds of culture than of biology. Yet, as he continues, 'where culture, or sub-culture is defined as a fixed and impermeable property of human life' the shift in the balance of explanation for exclusion from biology to culture is a difference 'of degree rather than any fundamental divergence'.²⁶

For all the salience of nationalism, race and ethnicity there are dangers in simply explaining the present turmoil in the world in these terms without very careful contextualisation, as the South African case illustrates. It is not only, as Nira Yuval Davis and Flora Anthias argue, that there is a danger of 'reifying' these categories, by 'treating them as totally independent and separate, and not considering how they intersect with other modes of differentiation such as class and gender'.²⁷ There is also the further danger that by accepting these explanations at face value, and not recognising the extent to which they are a product of specific social, economic and political circumstances, we will allow them to script the future. John Lonsdale and Bruce Berman warn us, 'The discourse of historians and social scientists constitute political acts that reflect positively and negatively on contemporary societies and on the meaning of their institutions and practices for their current inhabitants.'²⁸

This is particularly important in the case of South Africa, where we have to be wary of imposing inappropriate models drawn from the very different circumstances of eastern Europe or even other parts of Africa. Thus in a recent provocative account of the failure of nationalist politics in East Africa, John Lonsdale exhorts historians not to 'allow ethnicity to be captured by the politicians'; he maintains that 'Far from being the creature of civic irresponsibility, "tribe" has been one of Africa's central metaphors of civic virtue', which has provided space for Africans to develop 'a political

²⁶ P. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (), 31-4, 45.

²⁷ Flora Anthias and Nira Yuval Davis, eds. *Woman-Nation-State* (Basingstoke, 1989), p.2.

²⁸ 'Introduction. An encounter in Unhappy Valley' in B. Berman and J. Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley* (London, 1992), p.7.

language of plural debate, over issues that include gender and class conflict' which has provided a counter to the alien language of the nationalist the politicians and power of the state.²⁹ In a quite different context, Stuart Hall has also recently argued that blacks in Britain should 'recuperate' the term 'ethnicity' from the discourse of racism because it 'acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity.'³⁰

In South Africa, however, where it has long been part of the project of government to foist ethnic identity on its unwilling subjects in an attempt to 'divide and rule' such a strategy seems fraught with difficulty. The state's manipulation of the 'tribal' has both discredited the notion of ethnicity and given right-wing groups a stake in its continuance.

The demand that we re-appropriate a language which enables us to engage with rather than suppress difference is coupled with the growing disillusion with the capacities of the nation-state, especially in those parts of Africa where it is no longer able to guarantee even the most basic security of its citizens. Lonsdale argues in the African case that nationalist languages were 'both literally and symbolically alien, and even on their own imported terms they lacked all consistency', and he and Berman, like Basil Davidson, reflecting on the oppressions of contemporary Africa, warn against our taking for granted 'nationalism and the secular industrial nation state as the inevitable end of development and even more important, African custom and tradition'. These are, they assert, 'socially constructed artifacts that continue to reflect particular social and political interests and continue to shape vital and living African histories'.³¹ For Basil Davidson the 'nation-state', so desired by the generation which struggled for independence from colonialism is the source of contemporary African woes, is ultimately the 'black man's burden', the 'curse', which imperialism bequeathed to Africa.³²

In the current constitutional talks for a post apartheid dispensation, the issues of ethnic, national and racial identities, and tensions between the universal and the particular, the national and the

²⁹ 'African Pasts in Africa's Future', in *Unhappy Valley*, p.214.

³⁰ Hall, 'new Ethnicities', 257.

³¹ Lonsdale, 'African pasts in Africa's future', p.210; Berman and Lonsdale, 'Introduction', 7-8.

³² B. Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden. Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (London, 1992).

regional, have been joined in a new way. Yet the language of regionalism is also not neutral: as the apartheid state disintegrates, there is evidence that in parts of South Africa - notably Bophuthatswana, Kwazulu and the Ciskei - the ruling bureaucracies established by apartheid are now attempting to use the earlier apartheid ethnic discourse in order to hold onto regional power and resources. Their association with the far-right Afrikaner groups and elements of the security apparatus has so far discredited them with a wider black constituency. Nevertheless it would be unwise to predict their possible purchase in the future, not least because of the complex ways in which people come to incorporate elements of state discourse in the very process of resisting it.

If there are dangers of reading into the South African situation an analysis of ethnicity drawn from elsewhere, the imposition of understandings drawn from the racial politics of Britain and America is equally facile. In spite - or because - of the dominance of race in the ordering of South African society, African politics has been less concerned with racial identity than its British and American counterparts. This does not mean that black South Africans do not have a profound sense of themselves as black, although it is arguable that in the multi-faceted nature of identification, blackness takes its place with ethnic cultural identity which can easily accommodate the ANC's non-racial tradition: it does not derogate from their dignity or knowledge of their own cultures but serves to enhance strands within it, to strengthen the alternative language which John Lonsdale suggests is needed if the African past is to enhance the Africa's future.

It is frequently asserted that the ANC's politics of non-racialism has resulted from the influence of white missionaries, liberals and radicals on the black nationalism, that it is mainly directed to obtaining international assistance and goodwill and that it has dissipated the revolutionary impact that a more racially informed black nationalism would have had. While we would not wish to deny the instrumentality of non-racialism as a way of putting together an anti-apartheid alliance, we believe this is oversimple. One of the objects of our study will be to study the roots of non-racialism in the history of the ANC, and even more profoundly in the modes of incorporation in pre-colonial African society. If, however, one should not underestimate the depth of this tradition in South Africa, it should not be exaggerated either. As the peace talks falter in the midst of violence and the disorganisation of the town-

ships it is clear that the older leadership with their goals of non-racialism could easily be - and may already be - marginalised by the volatile youthful constituency in the townships, with a far more racialised agenda. For the aspirant middle-class too there may well be attractions in a politics of racial identity as they strive to redress historic and multiple discriminations.

It would, however, be very dangerous indeed if we were to allow the politics of identity to displace the politics of liberation - for liberation has not yet been won in the townships and villages of South Africa any more than it has in the rest of the 'developing world' or black ghettos of the United States of America. People without adequate food, shelter or clean water, dying of preventable diseases and man-made disasters who have no control over their lives have little choice over their 'identities'. To quote Laclau again, 'the proliferation of particularities ... is no panacea either. In the end it is self-defeating: it cannot be the ultimate principle, not least because relations between groups are not simply relations of difference, but also relations of power, exclusion and subordination. ...if the particularity asserts itself as mere particularity, in a purely differential relation with other particularities, it is sanctioning the status quo in the relation of power between groups. This is exactly the notion of "separate development" as formulated in apartheid: only the differential aspect is stressed while the relations of power on which the latter is based are systematically ignored.'³³

³³ 'Political frontiers, identification and political identities'.