Intellectual Traditions in South Africa. Ideas, Individuals and Institutions

By Peter Vale, Lawrence Hamilton and Estelle Prinsloo (eds)

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Vale, Hamilton and Prinsloo deserve thanks for putting together a collection of essays on 13 intellectual traditions present in our current political, cultural and intellectual discourse. With the subtitle *Ideas, Individuals and Institutions*, the authors set out in the not much traversed (yet superbly done in the exceptions, i.e. Dubow and Du Toit) field of South African intellectual history.

The book is organised in three sections. Part One, Inherited Ideas, Transplanted Institutions and Critiques, deals with Liberalism, Marxism, Afrikaner political thinking, and Positivism. Part Two, Resistance to Domination: African and Asian Alternatives, focuses on African nationalism, Pan- Africanism, Black Consciousness, Ghandian thinking, and Feminism. Part Three, Religious Dogma and Emancipatory Potential, approaches the intellectual, political and cultural offerings of Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam. An introduction by Peter Vale and a conclusion by Lawrence Hamilton round off a book written by specialists but fully accessible to most lay readers.

A book with such broad ambition as this one and written by authors coming from such different political and philosophical traditions poses a series of difficulties to the reviewer. Do you engage each chapter from a specialist perspective? Impossible; this would require 13 reviewers. Do you read the book in search for a common argument? Banal; the book is about plurality. Do you identify common themes or strong ideas at a meta-level as Hamilton has tried to do in the conclusion? This would imply reviewing the conclusion instead of the book.

Instead I have decided to attempt three readings of the book: a historical reading, a critical reading, and a focused reading, in that order.

As a book on the history of intellectual traditions in South Africa, despite acknowledged gaps by Vale in his incisive though at times apologetic introduction, the authors do a good job of introducing the reader to the historical trajectory of ideas and individuals within the different traditions represented in the book. The carefully annotated and referenced chapters are excellent sources for further reading and exploration of questions raised by the authors. The relative absence of institutions in the analysis (some chapters engaged with these better than others, for example, Allsobrook, Positivism; Moffet, Feminism; and Gross, Jewish Responses), a point flagged by Hamilton in the conclusion, is in my view a consequence of a tendency to an untheorised historicist analysis instead of a genealogical approach in some chapters. This said, most chapters are successful in presenting the multilayered intellectual sedimentation of the traditions they examine. Especially satisfactory in this regard are More's and Ndletyana's chapters on Black Consciousness and Pan-Africanism respectively. The advantage of the historical reading is that it makes clear to the reader the multiplicity of influences and intellectual toing and froing between continents, ideological and religious movements as well as political groupings in the context of the eventful political life of Southern Africa since the 17th Century. It moreover introduces the reader to the many voices that within and across intellectual traditions engaged with South African reality since its colonial past. Given the current state of the public intellectual discourse in South Africa, at times it feels as if the authors were talking of another country, a point aptly remarked upon in Vale's introduction.

The critical reading takes as its point of departure the stated preoccupation of the authors with the development of intellectual history as a field of study, as Hamilton suggests in the conclusion. From this point of view, the essays in the book are uneven examples of the potential of the field as, with the exception of Duvenage's and Allsobrook's pieces, all of them are to a large extent under-theorised in the sense that few chapters explore the theoretical framing of their exploration of a given tradition. In this context Hamilton's attempt in the conclusion to theorise intellectual history as a field of study feels a bit like a superimposed frame that does not reflect on the content of the book itself. His own proposal of intellectual history is tilted towards a kind of Anglo-American interpretation of the field in which "(...) historicity, context, meaning and intention, is vitally important for understanding the past (and thus the present) as concepts do not always mean the same thing" (p. 339). The problem with this approach is that pointing out that N. Machiavelli and I. Berlin hold different notions of freedom does not explain the conditions of emergence of either nor the implications of their intentions in such conceptualisations. Despite the gesture to Foucault's History of Sexuality in the conclusion, in this reviewer's reading, the historicist approach embraced by Hamilton and many of the essays in the book deprives intellectual history from the sharper critique of a genealogy of ideas in the tradition of

Nietzsche, Canguilhem and Foucault, that traces the effects of power that ideas have in a polity. Put more openly, in most, if not all, the essays gathered in the book there is an absence of discussion of the politics of truth that some of these traditions carry with themselves either nationally or in specific communities and the consequences these have had in affecting practices in national or community life. The apt quote by Clifford Geertz, cited by Hamilton, that ideas are "envehicled meanings" (p.339) is not taken to fruition in many of the chapters, as they lack political and conceptual sharpness in the interrogation of the tradition itself as well as in the analysis of the political trajectory of the ideas, individuals and institutions that carried them out. Once again there are exceptions in the book, Allsobrook on Positivism and Moffet on Feminism are cases worth noting.

The focused reading entails greater risk. It requires concentrating on specifics and choosing one or more chapters to analyse the extent to which intellectual history as presented in some of these chapters is actually "subversive and emancipatory", as Hamilton suggests in his interesting and enthusiastic conclusion. For this purpose I chose to engage directly with Pieter Duvenage's chapter 'Afrikaner intellectual history: An interpretation' in contrapuntal relation with the chapters by Allsobrook, Nash and Moffet. I am doing this for two reasons: first, as I mentioned earlier, Duvenage provides an elaborate theorisation of his analysis using Gadamer, Berlin and Sandel, which is worth pursuing. Secondly, being located at a historically Afrikaans institution, this reviewer is particularly interested in how Afrikaner intellectual tradition(s) are presented, interpreted and critiqued in comparison with other traditions, hence the choice of interpretations of Marxism, Positivism and Feminism to put in dialogue with Duvenage's take on Afrikaner thinking.

Duvenage's essay proposes an interpretation of Afrikaner history and, in particular, although not stated in these terms, of Afrikaner political thinking and practice in relation to the construction of the state. In doing this he combines three theoretical frameworks: Gadamer's hermeneutics; Berlin's concept of positive freedom (freedom to) and negative freedom (freedom from), and Sandel's notion of encumbered and unencumbered self, that is, the situation of the individual in relation to her own individual rights and therefore not burdened by the preoccupation with community (unencumbered) and of the individual fully involved in the common good of a community and therefore morally burdened by links of solidarity (encumbered). Finally, Duvenage uses the notion of misrecognition to explain the situation of Afrikaners in the colonial space in relation to both British Imperialism and the local indigenous population.

Duvenage's argument is that through the situation of "colonised colonialist", Afrikaner people developed a consciousness politically defined in the form of a federal republic, which was deeply affected by their experience of church

governance in the context of the Dutch Reformed Church (and its variations). This tendency, which was chrystallised in the northern republics in the 1850s, was challenged by the Union of South Africa in 1910 (on top of the devastating physical, economic, moral and political effects of the South African War already being experienced by the Afrikaner population), resurfaced under the National Party in 1948, and collapsed with the assassination of Verwoerd in 1966.

From the point of view of my early observation about the predominance of a historicist narrative in many of the chapters of the book, Duvenage's essay is almost teleological or, to be true to his philosophical approach, Hegelian. The history of Afrikaner thinking is about the unfolding and folding of the republican federalist community that chose an encumbered African future from their very colonial beginnings. The greatest focus of the narrative is on the pre-1910 period, with some focus on the different consciousness and political forms represented by the United Party and the Purified National Party in the 1930s; the ascendancy of Afrikaners to the state through the 1948 election; and Verwoerd's understanding of the notion of community identity under the rubrics of Apartheid and Separate Development. The chapter mentions in passing some internal Afrikaner dissidence (Bennie Keet, Beyers Naude, Van Zyl Slabbert, the *Sestigerbeweging*, etc.) as well as the new Afrikaner thinkers (Danie Goosen) and social movements (Solidarity) that are, in his view, examples of efforts to give contemporary expression to encumbered communities, a notion he puts in opposition to the political framing of the nation as a collection of individuals.

Totally absent from this narrative are any hint of the deeper genealogy of the Apartheid state and ideology in Afrikaner consciousness, the role that capitalist development and class differentiation played in the impoverishment of poor whites, or, much less, of the foundational role that the exploitation of the indigenous African population had in the structure of the colony, the Boer republics or the Apartheid state. Duvenage refers to Apartheid indirectly as an "unattractive period" in the country's history (p.78). Well, it surely was, but the amount of intellectual, bureaucratic and political effort that went into the construction and management of the Apartheid state by government and the Afrikaner intelligentsia, not to mention the consequences that it had for the majority of the population in the country, might have needed to be captured with a better-defined sociological term or maybe with a stronger adjective; 'devastating' comes to mind. Even more problematic is the omission of an analysis of the role that the combination of Positivism, cultural populism and Reformed religion had in the legitimation of the Apartheid state. All of this represents unavoidable contradictions and ideological detours in the notion of the encumbered community that cannot be analysed solely in terms of inclusion and exclusion or misrecognition, as real as these were too, but that needs to bring in the weight of a system of capitalist accumulation

based on scientific racism. From the point of view of Duvenage's own argument, what did the "twisted federalist" (p. 87), modernised, Apartheid bureaucratic state mean for the notion of the hermeneutic self and existence around the common good? How was the good, the moral of the community defined in this context and who were the intellectuals who helped to define it? What needs to be done now?

Enter Allsobrook's genealogy of South African Positivism. What emerges here is the reverse of Duvenage's disappointed Hegelian narrative.[1] Here Gadamer, Berlin and Sandel give way to Nietzsche and Adorno to provide a moral critique of Positivism as well as a historical analysis of the areas and manners in which Positivism has made its influence felt in South Africa's past and present. Verwoerd re-enters the scene, this time not as the last advocate of a communitarian hermeneutic self (if twisted) but as the engineer of the instrumental scientific state that in objectifying racism reified people with disastrous consequences for South Africa's future. The point here is not to rehearse Allsobrook's argument but to stress the incompleteness of Duvenage's interpretation, and how this avoidance of the contradictions within Afrikaner political thinking, is ideological and reflects a political stance that is much more than "an interpretation", as he states in the introduction to his essay. This is not a matter of heuristics or methodologies, not even a matter of philosophical perspectives. This is a matter of critique and the value of critique for our democracy and our intellectual life. Until Afrikaner intellectuals understand that their being colonised colonisers does not erase from history their construction of a system of racial exploitation with an equal accent on racism and exploitation, and are capable of articulating this as such, any discussion of the valuable idea of the encumbered communitarian self will only be an internal debate. Why is it possible for Marxist, Feminist, Jewish intellectuals to engage critically with their own historical trajectories, blunders and contradictions included, as the relevant chapters in this collection suggest, and yet so difficult to demystify (some) Afrikaner discourse?

It is in this context that Vale, Hamilton and Prinsloo's call to develop a strong body of intellectual history in and of South Africa is so important. For intellectual history to have a subversive and emancipatory role, it needs to break loose from historicism and be able to move more comfortably in interdisciplinary spaces; it needs to be able to turn the lens on to intellectual disciplines and professional bodies of knowledge; it needs to be able to penetrate intellectual and political teleologies; it needs to use its analytical power to identify the actuality of

1 "The crucial question though, is what became of the Afrikaners encumbered-hermeneutic concept of the self and republic-federalist political philosophy as explained in the previous section on the cultural-political institutional organization of the 19th century? What kind of reasoning convinced Afrikaners, against their political instincts, to accept the unitary South African in 1910?", p.85

colonial epistemologies, the Positivistic framing of much of the higher education curriculum, as well as the erasure of other forms of knowledge production and thinking about society, not to mention the ubiquitous place that race and racialised knowledge has in our most quotidian thinking. The subversive potential of intellectual history resides in turning our capacity for critique on to ourselves and our disciplines. As Bourdieu puts it in *Homo Academicus*, the objectification of the academic and her field of study should constitute the very essence, the sine qua non, of the intellectual task and not only a dedicated if, no doubt, fascinating field of study.