

Merle Lipton is a major liberal protagonist in the late-twentieth century Marxist-liberal debate about South African politics and society. That is reason enough to take this volume very seriously indeed.

The opening sentence promises examination of “conflicting historical accounts of the origins, evolution and, especially, the undermining of apartheid” (p 1). The examination in fact stretches beyond the formal demise of the apartheid regime into contemporary South African issues. It also dips into aspects of metahistoriography and the “psychology of the debate”.

Be ready for both inspiration and disappointment.

The book is valuable as an insider’s view of exchanges which influenced the works of many students of apartheid. As such, it provides a valuable perspective on scholarly crafts. It also allows the occasional glimpse of ignobility on all sides (some of the contents reminded me of wonderful situations in David Lodge’s satires). However, I do not think that any number of books by protagonists can settle the issues on which they choose to pursue their ideological feuds. What protagonists’ reviews can do – and what this book does – is to induce questions about academic methods and morals.

My concern is with the methods. Lipton’s assessment of the debate turns out to be a passionate defence of the liberal interpretation – and of her own place in the liberals’ debate with, mainly, the Marxists. The other third of the cast named in the title is all but missing from the script. Afrikaner and African “nationalist” interpretations enter the story briefly by way of paragraphs on Nolothshungu, Magubane and the later Giliomee. There are also scattered references to P.J. van der Merwe (albeit consistently as Van der *Merve*). A more recent generation of African intellectuals appear on pages 137 to 138. Perhaps other reviewers will comment on these choices of exemplars.

11. References: D. O’Meara, *Forty Lost Years. The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party 1948-1994* (Ravan, Randburg, 1996); D. Glaser, *Politics and society in South Africa A Critical Introduction* (Sage, London, 2001).

Also absent is attention to scholarship that is not overly beholden to either the Marxist or the liberal depictions of South African society. This places Lipton's assessment of the debate in ironic contrast to the theoretical review by one of her favourite Marxist targets, Dan O'Meara (1996). Another more inclusive review was produced by Glaser (2001).

Lipton's central contention can be summarised with the words "the Marxists were wrong". They were wrong about the relationship between capitalism and apartheid. They were wrong about all that that relationship implied for the prospects of social, economic and political change. To the extent that Marxists did adjust their interpretations in the direction pointed by liberals, they did so "tacitly", in reaction to unacknowledged liberal arguments (I recall that Marxist protagonists have said the same of the liberals).

The present review does not offer commentary on the relative merits of one or another interpretation. My interest is mainly in the quality of Lipton's exposition of the debate as it relates to the period 1970 to 1994 (Chapters 3 and 4; and Appendix 1). My contention is that her assessment of the debate as it pertains to this period, is not wholly credible. This is because her descriptions of the objects of the respective interpretations – the social actors and processes – are conceptually and empirically inadequate.

It is important to state my purposes as clearly as possible: my comments are not designed to aver that Lipton's presentation of the central propositions in the Marxist and the liberal literatures on South Africa are flawed; or not. The comments focus on the methodological quality of her justification for the claim that the liberal interpretation is superior to the Marxist interpretation. Such justifications must refer to descriptions of historical processes. It is my view that Lipton's process descriptions are not persuasive. This is not to say that she misrepresents the processes. The point is, rather, that she does not describe them in ways that facilitate appraisal of her descriptions.

Lipton's analytical strategy is to contrast the central propositions of the opposed interpretations with each other, and then to demonstrate the credibility of the liberal version with reference to her own reconstruction of the rise and decline of apartheid. As any reasonably experienced social scientist would know, there is one difficulty with such a strategy that is particularly hard to avoid: the choice of an interpretation tends to bias descriptions of the objects of interpretation. Lipton seems to be aware of this epistemological version of *Catch 22*, but she also seems to think of it as a matter of ideological bias only (p 173). Whatever the case may be, my comments do not concern difficulties that stem from a choice between interpretations. They concern lapses in conceptualisation and in the marshalling of evidence. The comments are, moreover, intended to respect methodological norms that are implied by Lipton's own advocacy of a relatively orthodox (but contestable) notion of "science" as "establishing facts ... [and] explaining them by formulating and testing hypotheses" (pp 3-4).

Lipton opens her assessment of the relative merits of the conflicting accounts of apartheid's rise and demise by asserting that "apartheid ... was ended by ... negotiated settlement" and that "This relatively peaceful transition" confounded both

“the general public” and “most scholars working on South Africa” because “They had anticipated that apartheid could only be ended by a violent revolution, or ... [a] velvet revolution ...” (p 1).

It would be interesting to know the frequency with which similar assertions have been published in peer-reviewed articles. Whatever the number might be, the assertions remain contestable on the basis of a variety of considerations. I will refer to only one of those, namely the emphasis on *negotiation* as the decisive process in the (formal) ending of apartheid.

Negotiation did not come about in isolation from, or without the generative conditioning of, other social, economic and political processes. These included processes of “reform” (a term that Lipton associates with liberal analyses) and more or less peaceful, more or less militant, and more or less violent resistance and oppression (terms that are associated with all interpretations). Lipton does attend to such processes. She also emends the initial formulation:

... apartheid was ended by an (unusual?) combination of reform from above and pressure from below, interacting with and reinforcing each other. Moreover, this domestic process occurred in an international context that ... pushed the parties toward accommodation, rather than revolution or intensified repression (p 105).

This emendation is, however, immediately reduced to emphasis on the role of “business” as a – if not quite *the* – critical agent in effecting the end to apartheid. The core of her argument about the relationship between capitalism and apartheid consists of two “if ... then” propositions. These are presented as testable hypotheses. The outcome of the test decides the relative credibility of the liberal and Marxist positions on a key matter of contention, namely the role of business in bringing about “post-1970 reforms” (p 47):

A central question in [the] debate is the origin of the reforms, and the political fluidity, that seemed impossible before 1970. If pressures from within the oligarchy, particularly from business, were a major factor in driving this process, then the liberal argument is correct. But if the aim of business was to secure a counter-revolution that would perpetuate the apartheid regime, and if they only abandoned this under domestic and external pressures, then the revisionists were at least partly correct, that is in relation to the aims of business, though not to the long-term incompatibility of capitalism and apartheid (pp 105-106).

It seems to me that the translation of Marxist propositions about the relationship between *capitalism and the apartheid state* into a liberal language about *business and (political) reform* threatens to pre-empt further debate. This is so, because the translation ignores significant theoretical differences. It is, however, not a line that can be pursued here; although I will touch on some of the concepts. For present purposes the focus is on Lipton’s own concepts.

Her argument contains two *socio-logics*. One is structuralist. Liberal structuralism ascribes the demise of apartheid to its long-term incompatibility with capitalism. Marxist structuralism asserts the compatibility of capitalism and apartheid, albeit in continually adapted forms. The other logic is vaguely actionist.

In the Marxist version, capitalists and workers are the major actors, but the capitalists are closely, though variously, implicated with state-related actors in processes that defend and advance capitalist class interests. In the liberal version “business” or “businessmen” are the major agents, even though it (or they) also react to other agents (for example black workers and the nationalist government). “Business” and “businessmen” calculate their interests by considering the costs and benefits (pp 54-55) of particular policies and position themselves accordingly. It is this figurationist logic that interests me, hence the following comments are mainly concerned with Lipton’s presentation of “business” and “businessmen”.

It is a basic norm of sociological interpretation that structures, actors, actions and issues should be cautiously conceptualised (and categorized). We deal, however, with phenomena that refuse to conform to our preferred concepts. Hence many of our descriptive terms turn out to be loose labels, rather than crafted categories. To greater or lesser extents, we also select evidence that suit our favourite arguments and phrase our assertions to emphasise certainty, rather than uncertainty. Consequently the use of over-generalised terms and limited evidence is common; and the practice is often creative precisely because it assists generalisation. It should however be accompanied by explicit qualification of the limits of the terms and the scope of the associated generalisations.

Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists reflects very little concern for the qualified use of concepts. Close scrutiny will reveal occasional hesitance about the boundaries of “business” and “businessmen”. There is, however, no sustained attempt to clarify and qualify the denotative range of the concepts. Given Lipton’s purpose of assessing the comparative merits of conflicting interpretations, close attention to questions of conceptual equivalence would have been useful. On pages 108 to 109, she does deal with “capitalism”. Unfortunately her brief comments leave many questions unasked. Is a liberal’s “businessmen” of the same species as a Marxist’s “capitalists”? Are “the needs of capitalism” a synonym for “the needs of business” (pp 51, 54)? Are the “economic interests of businessmen” – or of particular occupational groups – conceptually equivalent to the “class interests of capitalists” (p 55)? Is the claim that “economic factors” play a role in political mobilisation theoretically interchangeable with the claim that political mobilisation has a “class basis” (pp 64-65)?

The need for conceptual self-consciousness – if not discipline – is not limited to the comparative assessment of interpretations. Systematic description within an interpretation is impossible without the categorisation of actors and processes. In Lipton’s story, however, “business” is an actor that is sometimes internally differentiated and sometimes not; that sometimes manifests as Harry Oppenheimer and at other times as one or another association that claims to represent some sector of the economy; that now speaks against the background of a particular corporation and then through a political party. It (or they, or some of them) sometimes speaks out and sometimes goes undercover. If an association of industrialists that are supportive of recognition of African unions cannot be found in a particular time or place, then an individual corporate baron that is associated with some liberal political party or position can be called in. If the number of mentionable liberal English businessmen does not seem impressive enough to make a case for liberal activism against some aspect of apartheid, then others may be added in:

During the 1970s the FCI and Assocom were joined in hammering out unusually well-developed policies on economic, social and, later, political issues. They were joined by Afrikaners such as Andries Wassenaar of Sanlam, Wim de Villiers of General Mining, Albert Wessels of Toyota, and, later, the designers of the Nedbank scenarios" (p 62, rephrased by LP).

The avoidance of clear and consistent categorization of business interest groups makes it possible to gloss the credibility of just about any assertion about business interests, attitudes and actions. It also obscures the criteria in terms of which particular slices of evidence are to be selected, ordered and assessed. For example: with regard to which issues and policies, and with reference to what moments in time, is it permissible to splice "critics such as Gordon Waddell of JCI, Tony Bloom of Premier Banking, and Chris Ball of Barclays Bank" into the same segment of business history as "Afrikaners such as Andries Wassenaar of Sanlam ..." (pp 61-62)?

Inability to differentiate actors is one consequence of weak conceptualisation. Another is questionable marshalling of evidence for explanatory purposes. Consider the following example:

Afrikaner economic advance ... was ... accompanied by a decline in racist views and by growing acceptance of the *verligte* argument that apartheid was both unworkable and wrong (p 68).

This is an instance of the more general liberal proposition that economic growth would (and did) engender a decline in racist attitudes, practices and policies. Empirical assessment of such assertions requires attention to the meaning of actor and attitude labels (like *verligte*). It also requires attention to alternative ways of interpreting data that are said to indicate change in the phenomena which the concepts denote. Lipton's work is weak on both scores.

The above proposition is preceded by a brief statement on survey data that "confirmed the gradual shift [amongst Afrikaners] toward more *verligte* views". This is itself preceded by a cryptic comment on "writers such as Andre Brink, Elsa Joubert, and Breyten Breytenbach" (p 68). Such odd exemplifications of "changing white attitudes and values" are probably best ignored. One could also ignore the fact that *verligte* is an eminently flexible and porous label. The survey data are, however, worthy of attention.

The proportion of Afrikaners accepting blacks in the same jobs as whites rose from 38 per cent in 1970 to 62 per cent in 1978, while those accepting interracial sport rose from 4 to 76 per cent (pp 67-68).

How do we explain the enormous attitude shifts (assuming, that is, that the data were reliable and the conclusions valid)? How can we connect them with both policy and regime "reforms"? Lipton's exposition implies that attitudinal enlightenment followed economic growth; and that it was, more particularly, associated with growing class stratification amongst Afrikaners. This dynamic in turn induced policy reforms.

Such an argument would require demonstration of, at the very least, the implied time sequence of economic, attitude and policy changes. The sequence is, however, not demonstrated. It is simply asserted that the liberalisation of sport policy

and the softening of job restrictions followed the observed attitude changes. Moreover: alternative explanatory arguments are not considered – except, that is, by way of rejecting Marxist arguments about the causes of policy changes.

Different arguments are possible and a useful assessment of interpretations will consider them. Close scrutiny of the data might show that the sequence of attitude and policy change was different from that implied by Lipton's narrative: that attitudinal changes followed policy changes. Whatever the sequences were, this book does not facilitate analysis of change for the simple reason that it obfuscates time and action sequences as much as it homogenises actors. These lapses are amply demonstrated by what is arguably one of the more important sections of the book: "Challenges to the liberal analysis" (pp 57-64). It deals for the most part with the contrasting claims of liberals and Marxists regarding the politics of African unionisation. Suffice it to say that Lipton succeeds in obfuscating the story by invoking, discarding and switching actors at will and by frequently jumping both forwards and backwards through time.

The empirical credibility of Lipton's exposition is also weakened in a quite elementary way. Her catalogue of Marxist and liberal arguments is very unevenly documented.

Significance is in the eye of the beholder, but it seems to me that the following argument about Marxist claims is significant:

The claim that business *only recognized African trade unions* because they were forced by union militancy is *ex post facto* reasoning, based on the later strength of the unions (p 58, italics in the original).

My immediate problem with this and many other propositions in the book is not their literal truth value. It is that too many significant propositions are not adequately documented. The quoted assertion, for example, stands without any citation. I would like to know which and how many Marxists – not to mention liberals – made that or similar claims. I would like to know what the time references of the processes and events were. I would like to know if the claim was in fact about *union* militancy, or perhaps about *worker* militancy. I would like to know which denotations and connotations of "business" and "recognized" are attached to the words of the unidentified authors. I want to be able to compare different descriptions of the processes that are the objects of clashing interpretations. I want to get to know and do all of that, and more, without having to ransack the history shelves, book indexes and JSTOR word searches.

Where Lipton does cite authoritative works, her own *Capitalism and apartheid* is too often the major source: "As noted previously, this section is, unless otherwise indicated, based on Lipton 1985" (p 195, note 28). In my view an author may advertise the fact that she published on a theme as much as she wills, but I also believe that it is not good practice to call on her own authority when she challenges accounts that dissent from hers. It seems to me that this belief fits quite well with Lipton's (implied) injunction that historians should "recognize and record ... evidence" that is at variance with their preferred views (p 131).

Book Feature

The consequence of conceptual incoherence and of empirical inadequacy is that we cannot judge which histories and sociologies are more or less credible. That consequence may perhaps be discounted if one accepts uncertainty as characteristic of knowledge seeking – as Lipton claims to do (pp 171-172). The greater loss is that her book does not help us to select insights that might be useful in constructing interpretations beyond the dated terms of a formerly influential debate.

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