

It is now nearly thirty years since Merle Lipton published an article in *African Affairs* under the title “Debate about South Africa: Neo-Marxists and neo-liberals” (1979) and almost twenty-five years since she published her book *Capitalism and apartheid* (1985), the main purpose of which was to refute the “revisionists’” alleged suggestions that capitalists were either the architects, or major beneficiaries, of segregation and apartheid. It is doubtful whether this “bitter dispute” was ever much more than a storm in a teacup and it is now, if I may mix my metaphors, a very dead horse. It is probably the case that both sides in this argument initially went too far and that what she describes as the “revisionists’” secondary position – that capitalists may not have wanted segregation and apartheid, but were quite well able to accommodate themselves to it – is not only a compromise position, but also one that may come as near as possible to that elusive commodity: historical “truth”.

If nothing else, this book demonstrates the problems of using the word “liberal” in a South African, or perhaps any, historical context. The peculiar South African use of the word is, when combined with the word “white”, as in “white liberal”, either a self-definition by white people who consider themselves to be well disposed towards black people, or an opprobrious description by black people of white people whom they regard as middle class, comfortable, paternalistic and condescending – prepared to sympathise with, but not having to suffer with, their black compatriots. The more usual global definitions are almost equally conflicted, referring both to those with a concern for human rights and/or a tendency to favour a weak state and minimally restrained market forces – not necessarily the same things. Ms Lipton herself offers at one stage a definition that seems to include a wide spectrum from libertarians to social democrats – by no means a precise category.

Although I am myself the son of an alleged founder of the “liberal school” of South African history, I have always been sceptical about the term for the specific reasons that W.M. Macmillan was, at least in his South African phase, a Fabian and social democrat, and that his only close historical alliance or partnership was with his student and friend, C.W. de Kiewiet, in a school of two, and for the more general reason that “liberal school” is an ambiguous category. Is it a humanitarian, free market, paternalist or condescending school? One would hope the first of these, but it could be a combination of any or all of the above.

A central theme of this book is that history has proved Ms Lipton and the liberals, whoever they may be, right, and the neo-Marxist revisionists wrong. Apartheid and economic growth were incompatible and apartheid had to go. This may have been Ms Lipton’s view, but it was not W.M. Macmillan’s view. In his latter years he used frequently to remark that what he called “a good depression”

would be more likely to break apartheid than prosperity. He was probably right. Ms Lipton chides historians who leave out awkward facts, but she seems to have left out one large and very awkward fact – the oil crisis of 1973-1974, and the subsequent world depression. This had a particularly devastating effect on countries like South Africa, which were not oil producers and were large-scale exporters of minerals – an increase in the price of gold was not sufficient to counteract the harmful consequences. Ms Lipton believes that the Durban strikes of 1973 were “spontaneous”, whatever that may mean – and it is a little hard on the NUSAS wage commissions and black labour activists – but it is unlikely that the coup in Portugal and Portuguese decolonisation were “spontaneous” and unrelated to global economic factors. There is a demonstrable link between these events and the Soweto Uprising – as Beyers Naudé pointed out to a Swedish interviewer, events in Mozambique and Angola convinced black activists inside South Africa that they should not wait for liberation to come to them – they would have to make the revolution themselves.

Many readers will, I fear, find that Ms Lipton falls into the paternalistic and condescending wing of the “liberal school”. She seems to be determined to demonstrate that the movement towards democracy in South Africa was a top-down process of voluntary reform beginning with a surely imaginary move to the left by Vorster in 1970. By this sleight of hand, events such as the Durban strikes, the liberation of Angola and Mozambique, and the Soweto Uprising, become almost irrelevant. She also contrives to dismiss armed struggle, mass mobilisation in the mid-1980s, and most sanctions, with the possible exception of financial sanctions, as of little significance. By some strange logic South Africa’s defeat (or at least stalemate) at Quito Canavale in Angola becomes a defeat for the ANC. It is true that in terms of the deal which allowed for a South African withdrawal from Angola, and the independence of Namibia, the ANC had to withdraw its freedom fighters from Angola to Uganda, but, by that stage, armed struggle was irrelevant. The negotiations which she sees as beginning in February 1990, were already well under way. They had got going in the aftermath of Botha’s failure to cross the Rubicon in 1985 – big business played a part with the “Anglo American” talks at Mfuwe in that year, but more significant were the Commonwealth’s Eminent Persons Group talks of 1986 and the simultaneous beginning of talks with Nelson Mandela. The stream of delegations from South Africa to Lusaka from 1985 onwards were all part of a process that was tolerated by a government which, under a combination of political, military and economic pressures, had finally realised, on the advice of the more intelligent members of its military and security apparatus, that it had involved itself in an unwinnable war. Economic prosperity did not break apartheid, nor was its dismantling voluntary. Its end came about as a result of an overwhelming combination of internal and external pressures. It is sad that a preoccupation with old historiographical battles has blinded the author of this book to the realities of late twentieth-century South African history.

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