

South African Liberalism and South African History: An Ongoing Challenge



Anthony Egan,

a Catholic priest and Jesuit, is a member of the Jesuit Institute – South Africa in Johannesburg. Trained in history and politics at UCT (MA) and Wits (PhD) he is also a moral theologian, who has lectured at Wits University (Political Studies), St John Vianney Seminary (moral theology) and St Augustine College of South Africa (moral theology and applied ethics). He is a Research Fellow at the Helen Suzman Foundation.

When I first studied history at the University of Cape Town in the 1980s, I came across a debate which had been raging in scholarly circles over liberal versus radical (usually Marxist) interpretations of South African history. We had, I recall, representatives of all the factions at UCT; liberals, Marxists, fairly conservative empiricists, and increasingly, scholars who were not so easily categorised. They certainly understood that economics was the engine of history, but noted that the dynamics of events could not simply be determined by one's social class. They saw a role for ideas and individual human agency.

For too long 'liberalism' has been a swearword in South Africa, quite often associated with terms like 'racist' or 'white'. While this association has rightly been contested (indeed with many authors showing how liberalism has been integral to African nationalism and to the polity of the new South Africa) the liberal/radical debate in South African historiography has been muted. Perhaps this is because that ideological divide no longer exists in South African historical scholarship.

Why does it no longer exist? It does not seem that either 'side' has been vanquished – if anything, it seems that a synthesis has emerged that takes account of race and class, structures of power and individual agency. Though this may be the result of the crisis of Marxism since 1989, I would like to suggest that it reflects a new accommodation – a new *modus vivendi*, one might say, which has emerged. I will suggest that such an accommodation is central to a proper understanding of liberalism.

Making a distinction

In teasing out the question of how South African Liberalism is represented historically, I wish to draw a distinction made by British political philosopher John Gray, who sees what he calls two incompatible distinctions within liberal thought. The first he categorises as a kind of universal rational consensus, the second as a project of peaceful consensus, which allows for values of toleration and coexistence between regimes and ways of life.

Gray rejects a simplistic liberal universalism in favour of a liberal pluralism that seeks consensus. Properly understood, universal human values "frame constraints on what can count as a reasonable compromise between rival values and ways of

life.”¹ This is a necessary step to resist totalitarian and fundamentalist regimes and ideologies. It acknowledges that there are “many varieties of human flourishing ... no less incompatible with the universalist political projects that have emerged from the Enlightenment” but,

Classic enlightened liberal thinking, from Locke and Kant to Rawls, Nozick, Popper and Hayek, cannot embody a kind of universalism tenable in today’s pluralist society. Liberalism as modus vivendi can.

“To affirm that humans thrive in many different ways is not to deny that there are universal human values. Nor is it to reject the claim that there should be universal human rights. It is to deny that universal values can only be fully realized in a universal regime. Human rights can be respected in a variety of regimes, liberal and otherwise. Universal human rights are not an ideal constitution for a single regime throughout the world, but a set of minimum standards for peaceful coexistence among regimes that will always remain different.”²

Gray’s understanding of liberalism as a *modus vivendi*, a project of peaceful consensus, rejects a crude ‘one size fits all’ universalism and the notion of a universal regime. Classic enlightened liberal thinking, from Locke and Kant to Rawls, Nozick, Popper and Hayek, cannot embody a kind of universalism tenable in today’s pluralist society. Liberalism as *modus vivendi* can.

According to Gray, *modus vivendi*

“expresses the belief that there are many forms of life in which humans can thrive...[it] accepts that there are many forms of life, some of them no doubt yet to be contrived, in which humans can flourish. For the predominant ideal of liberal toleration, the best life may be unattainable, but it is the same for all. From a standpoint of *modus vivendi*, no kind of life can be the best for everyone. The human good is too diverse to be realized in any life. Our inherited ideal of toleration accepts with regret the fact that there are many ways of life. If we adopt *modus vivendi* as our ideal we will welcome it.”³

Notice how, if I read him correctly, Gray helps us to contextualise liberalism: universal liberal values (freedom, conscience, human rights, etc) have to be situated in real, as opposed to imaginary, idealised societies, so that they may be a universal force for good. They have to adapt and take their shape within particular political regimes, economic systems, religious beliefs and cultural practices.

I would add that Gray’s argument helps one to recognise the particularity and persistence of liberalism in societies such as South Africa, and to explain how one can see Liberalism as both a progressive and conservative force. With such lenses we can see how Cape liberalism in the 19th century was indeed progressive in its context; part of a trend that saw greater democracy in some of the outposts of the British Empire (notably New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the Cape Colony) than in metropolitan Britain itself. We can also see how the same tradition, espoused in the 1950s by elements of the Liberal, United and Progressive Parties, came to be justifiably challenged. In an era of universal metropolitan franchise and rapid decolonization of the Empire, the notion of qualified franchise was indeed anachronistic and patronising.

In fairness, the problem remained one of situatedness. Given the difference of constituency between the SA Liberal Party and the African National Congress, it is also reasonable to see how, between 1953 and 1958, the Liberals were able to apply

a gradualist approach to the application of universal liberal values, while the ANC (which had, until well into the 1930s, been a party of the black petty bourgeoisie, and reformist and gradualist in discourse⁴) could now appear more universal in its call for full adult franchise.

That the latter were increasingly framing their call in Marxist language (another form of universal consensus) should not detract us from seeing far greater common ground with liberalism than many would today like to imagine. Socialist, or more accurately, social democratic, thinking was by the 1950s part of South African liberal thinking too, so much so that in 1961 Alan Paton could ask the Liberal Party conference whether the party considered itself a liberal or a socialist party. Similarly, prominent ANC leaders like Albert Luthuli, many of whom, like Luthuli, were close to Liberal Party leaders, could be seen to have feet in both classic Liberal and Marxist camps.

It is all too easy to ascribe such complexity to South African particularity, political confusion or an early form of 'liberal slideaway'. Such analyses, I think, are too facile, often rooted in an understanding of liberalism that regards universal rational consensus as the unchanging and unchangeable norm. Rather, what I see in these particularities are illustrations of Gray's case for liberalism, which seeks as a *modus vivendi* the particular application of universal principles in a specific context.

... much of the debate has been centred on conflicting universal rationalisms (liberalism and Marxism) rather than the search for a modus vivendi, and in this case, a modus intelligendi; a way of making sense of the past.

As we turn to look at the way in which South African liberalism has been represented in history, both as a 'school' of history writing and in the history of liberal politics, we shall see that much of the debate has been centred on conflicting universal rationalisms (liberalism and Marxism) rather than the search for a *modus vivendi*, and in this case, a *modus intelligendi*; a way of making sense of the past.

Liberal versus radical historiography

Within studies of South African historiography a number of key areas emerge that seem to categorise interpretations of the South African past: imperial, Afrikaner nationalist, African nationalist, liberal and radical 'schools' of interpretation⁵. On closer examination, many of the authors and exemplars of the various schools conflate into each other, often unintentionally, as a result of the fidelity of the historian, however ideologically motivated, to the evidence he/she uses.

For the purpose of this article I shall focus on aspects of the liberal/radical debate in South African historiography. I shall argue that much of the 'debate' is more a reflection of the debaters' positions than of the historical texts under examination. I shall also suggest that Gray's distinction is a useful means to challenge the underlying liberal and Marxist universalisms that underpin the debate.

The crude lines of the debate might be sketched as follows: while liberal historians emphasised race (cooperation as much as conflict), radicals emphasised class (both its formation and struggle). Even as they picked over the same area or period (e.g. 19th Cape frontiers), historians stressed different things, sometimes to such a degree that one imagines they were writing about a different subject. Both groups have been accused of excessive selectivity in the facts they chose to advance their argument, but, as we know, a list of factoids does not a history make! What we

have in both cases are attempts to construct a narrative that has contributed to a contested understanding of a past that has a bearing on the South African present and future.

From the 1960s until well into the 1990s there was a real sense that the writing of history reflected trends in the broader struggle against apartheid. For the narrowly positivist empirical school of research it seemed that facts alone could change peoples' minds – epitomised by the annual Surveys of Race Relations produced by the SA Institute of Race Relations, as well as by journalists who believed that unvarnished factual exposés could bring down apartheid⁶. Marxists countered (correctly, I would argue) that such a view failed to recognise how economic and social self interests rendered such evidence impotent, unless framed in terms which showed the futility of minority privilege in the face of popular resistance.

... that in some way or another apartheid was linked to the economy, that existing South African capitalism had to varying degrees benefitted from apartheid and that any future democratic dispensation would have to address what kind of capitalism (if any!) was needed for South Africa.

Just as much Afrikaner history had become a function of the myth of Afrikaner nationalism, so too had Marxist history become servant to the (real or imagined) class struggle. At its most crude, it expressed (often rousing) the forward march of a proletarianised African people, heading with varying degrees of inevitability towards its own October Revolution.⁷ In other forms, it reduced 'liberal' agencies such as churches, missionaries and white liberals to little more than agents of colonial power⁸. (The fact that said subjects occupied a more ambivalent position did not fit into the schema).

In contrast, it must be noted that many liberal historians committed much the same error from the other side. With liberal history's emphasis on race cooperation and, at times uncritical, presuppositions of the truth of universal humane rationalism, not mediated through the frame of a particular constraint of context, they presumed only the best motivations of the subjects they examined. Many also mirrored in their assumptions the electoral gradualism of liberal parties. Few tried to seriously address the real question that Marxists hammered home: that in some way or another apartheid was linked to the economy, that existing South African capitalism had to varying degrees benefitted from apartheid and that any future democratic dispensation would have to address what kind of capitalism (if any!) was needed for South Africa.

An exception to this, and one that proves both the complexity of liberalism and the need to avoid making historical overgeneralisations, was the historian C W De Kiewiet, whose superb synthesis *A History of South Africa: Social and Economic*⁹, remains a classic attempt to understand South African economic history by one who was undoubtedly a liberal in his politics, but who was open to certain forms of socialism.¹⁰ Another example of a liberal who took economics seriously in his analysis of society was the young Leo Marquard, who under the name 'John Burger' presented a case for socialism in South Africa in the 1940s.¹¹

Even as the debate between liberal and radical historians came to a head in the late 1970s, one of the most astute observers, American historian Harrison Wright, noted that despite their differences liberals and radicals shared much common ground. Both, he noted, shared a common faith in reason and optimism for a possible future (which echoes Gray's point about universal rational consensus); both look for agency

behind social crises and are sure that they can judge such agency. Both have a sense of moral superiority about the rightness of their cause, and the sense that past and present can influence a future that they desire.¹²

Reasons of space prevent me from revisiting the debate that Wright himself generated. Rather let me point out that from the 1980s onwards the lines between liberal and radical history writing in South Africa blurred even further. Marxist scholars, with the exception of a handful enamoured of Poulantzian structuralism, were already moving beyond where they had been – they were increasingly open to the role of culture, identity and even personalities in history. Some Poulantzians would soon follow suit. Liberals, too, emulating the pioneering thinking of De Kiewiet, came to see the economic dimensions to history more clearly, and even recognised the accuracy and validity of class analyses and class struggles as forces for historical change.

Indeed, one often wonders today whether distinct terms like ‘liberal’ or ‘Marxist’ make any sense. Historian Charles van Onselen, coming from the stable of ‘cultural’ Marxism (influenced by British social and socialist historians like E P Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm), made his name with brilliant socio-economic studies of black and white working-class culture on the Witwatersrand¹³. His later books include biographies of a black sharecropper and an international gangster (who may have been Jack the Ripper!), as well as a rip-roaring narrative of Highveld banditry¹⁴. Though these books, with their focus on individuals and personal agency, may seem the kind of thing a liberal historian may write, they share, together with his earlier work, an interest in social and economic outsiders. That they show a *toenadering* between liberal and Marxist scholarship is no anomaly, but rather a sign of Gray’s notion of the *modus vivendi*: liberals and the left finding at least elements of common ground in a new context.

The role of liberal movements and persons in South African historiography is all too often underplayed by radicals or overplayed or addressed uncritically by Liberal historians.

The historiography of South African liberalism

Less friendly are the relations between liberal and radical historians of South African liberalism itself. Given that a certain form of South African liberalism continues in party political form (the Democratic Alliance) and that a less explicit but no less real form of liberalism has in fact triumphed post-1994, in the South African Constitution and Bill of Rights, in the rule of law and in the primacy of institutions like the Constitutional Court and the office of the Public Protector, this should come as no surprise. We may even say that Gray’s *modus vivendi* liberalism has become the consensus from which all but a few slightly odd political players operate. But the need of the present to affirm the triumph of ‘liberation’ over ‘liberalism’ necessitates downplaying liberal political figures and parties.

The role of liberal movements and persons in South African historiography is all too often underplayed by radicals or overplayed or addressed uncritically by Liberal historians. A historian like Paul Rich, particularly in his earlier book *White Power and the Liberal Conscience*¹⁵, epitomises the former tendency. In his book, covering 1921 to 1960, Rich focuses almost exclusively on liberalism as a tool for white social control, assimilation of the black middle class and the promotion of 19th century Cape liberal political gradualism. He seems not to recognise that the Liberal Party itself comprised a range of traditions, split between generally conservative Cape

liberals, radical Transvaalers and pragmatic Natalians, or indeed that it underwent a fairly rapid radicalisation. In 1953, it stood for a (Cape-style) qualified franchise. By 1958 it advocated universal suffrage, and by its demise in 1968 it stood ideologically more or less in the same camp as the ANC.

While his later book *Hope and Despair*¹⁶, a collection of essays interpreting liberalism as caught between these two emotions (once again, a gross simplification), is somewhat more nuanced in its critique and more generous in acknowledging the radical potential of liberalism, the damage Rich did was already done. Former Liberal Party members treated the approach of historians with suspicion, refusing them access to their papers, jealously guarding privately held collections of Party documents and tending towards defensiveness in interpreting their own history.

A breakout came in 1987 with the publication of a collection of conference papers from 1985, *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa*.¹⁷ The book went further than any previous work in reaffirming not only the importance of the Liberal Party, but also the role of liberalism in many other sectors of society. Significantly, it noted how conservative, centrist and radical streams had coexisted and persisted in liberalism. Some of the scholars even drew connections between the liberal tradition and the demand for national liberation. This was echoed, interestingly, in an entry on liberalism in a more radical book, a theological reflection, *Contending Ideologies in South Africa*. The authors admitted that liberalism was varied, had radical potential and could indeed find common ground with liberation theology, even if, in the opinion of its authors, liberal individualism might challenge the covenantal relationship of God with humanity.¹⁸

Yet liberal defensiveness has remained a factor. One senses elements of liberal apologetics even in the otherwise excellent history of the Party by one of its sometime members, Randolph Vigne¹⁹. While earlier historian, Janet Robertson,²⁰ seems to take up a kind of 'centrist' view (à la Alan Paton), Vigne is more clearly concerned to show how the Liberal Party became a radical movement in South Africa at a time, the 1960s, when African nationalism was crushed and the mantle of resistance was passed to the churches, the student movement and the Party. By showing it interacting with many different sectors, he manages to avoid a kind of moral universalist model of interpreting the Party and portrays liberalism in splendid ideological isolation.

Perhaps more than any area of South African historiography (except maybe church history), biography is the realm in which liberalism has thrived. From the works of Paton (on Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr and Archbishop Geoffrey Clayton) to Michael Cardo's recent biography of Peter Brown, the figure of the liberal has been central. This makes sense. Distinguished historian and biographer Hugh Brogan observes:

"Biography at its best is a profoundly civilising force. It rebukes historians, with their bias in favour of generalisations, social forces, political machinery and machinations. It rebukes bigots, who forget the price in individual human suffering that their rigidities exact. It rebukes philistines of all sorts, showing the richness in variety of human life and experience. It can display greatness but it also shows the cost of greatness to the ordinary people surrounding the hero or heroine."²¹

In short, it epitomises the liberal project that emphasises human agency, personhood and liberty. Unfortunately, practised in a vacuum it may equally obscure the situatedness of any biographical subject. Moreover, it heightens the sense of person in the process (a person writing about another person) where all too easily (and perhaps inevitably) the selfhood of the writer rewrites the subject of the biography in the writer's own image. If all writing is a projection of one's self, how much more is biography a self-projection of the other? Radicals and liberals alike are vulnerable to this, with many a Marxist scholar knowingly or unknowingly projecting his/her Marxism onto the events and opinions of the person under examination.

Why writing and reading history matters

Historical writing is a *modus intelligendi*, a means of understanding and interpreting the past. It is almost inevitably done from the perspective of the present, and as in any act of writing, is implicitly, if not explicitly, an expression of the values, preoccupations and ideas of the author. With this in mind we should be wary of any claim to radical objectivity; if anything we should acknowledge and perhaps celebrate the subjectivity of the exercise. Such subjectivity should not however be seen as an excuse for either fabrication of evidence or epistemological relativism.

Where does this leave the representations of liberalism in South African history (both as liberal history writing and as the history of liberalism)? I would like to sum up my thoughts by means of a few theses.

*Thesis One: South African liberalism is best understood historically as a pragmatic response to the situation in which liberals find themselves. At its best South African liberalism sought to adapt universal values to a concrete situation to find an acceptable *modus vivendi*. This accommodation to context gives liberalism the opportunity to engage with other ideologies, and does not tie liberalism to laissez faire capitalism or restrictive electoral politics.*

*Thesis Two: The liberal/radical debate in South African historical writing reflects a changing relationship between liberalism understood as a universalism and its development of a *modus vivendi*. At its most acrimonious there was a clash of universalisms; as a more pragmatic understanding of liberalism and Marxism developed, the tensions eased. The negotiated transition expresses a decidedly liberal way out of apartheid, as does a Constitution rooted in tolerance. This, needless to say, needs encouraging.*

*Thesis Three: Far from being an ivory tower debate, the liberal/radical controversy in South African history points towards a positive re-evaluation of liberalism in our society. By seeing the complexity in our past, be it the role capitalism played in the creation and dismantling of apartheid or the role of human agency and chance in social transformations, we can see the complexity of our present and future. The negotiation of value, the practice of compromise, based on the affirmation of core values, is essential to peace in South Africa. Liberal values as a *modus vivendi* that take into account changing contexts make this peace both possible and desirable to the broadest base of people.*

NOTES

- 1 John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2000), 20.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 4 Much as present interests try to wipe out this initial gradualism, couched admittedly in a 'one day' attitude to universal franchise, the case remains that the early ANC were essentially a party of black middle class liberals' whose own interests came before national liberation; see Dale T McKinley, *The ANC and the Liberation Struggle: A Critical Biography* (London: Pluto Press, 1997).
- 5 For a detailed account, see: Christopher Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past: Major Historians on Race and Class* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988); Ken Smith, *The Changing Past: Trends in South African Historical Writing* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989).
- 6 It is worth noting that harassment of journalists then and now suggests that successive Establishments may well be empirical positivists!
- 7 See, for example: H J and R E Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa* (London: IDAF 1969); Bernard M Magubane, *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).
- 8 Nosipho Majeke [Dora Taylor], *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest* (Johannesburg: Society of Young Africa, 1952).
- 9 Oxford: Oxford University Press 1941.
- 10 On De Kiewiet, see: Christopher Saunders, *De Kiewiet: Historian of South Africa* (Cape Town: UCT Centre for African Studies, 1986).
- 11 'John Burger', *The Black Man's Burden* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943).
- 12 Harrison M Wright, *The Burden of the Present: Liberal-Radical Controversy over Southern African History* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1977), 94.
- 13 Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914*. Volume 1: *New Babylon*, Volume 2: *New Nineveh* (Johannesburg: Ravan 1982).
- 14 C.F van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985* (Cape Town & Oxford: David Philip/James Currey, 1996); *The Fox and the Flies: The World of Joseph Silver, Racketeer and Psychopath* (London: Jonathan Cape 2007); *Masked Raiders: Irish Banditry in Southern Africa 1880-1899* (Cape Town: Zebra Press 2010).
- 15 Paul B Rich, *White Power and the Liberal Conscience: Racial Segregation and South African Liberalism* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1984).
- 16 Paul B Rich, *Hope and Despair: English-speaking Intellectuals and South African politics 1896-1976* (London: I B Tauris, 1993).
- 17 Jeffrey Butler, Richard Elphick & David Welsh (eds.), *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa: Its History and Prospect* (Middletown CT & Cape Town: Wesleyan University Press/ David Philip, 1987).
- 18 James Leatt, Theo Kneifel & Klaus Nurnberger (eds.), *Contending Ideologies in South Africa* (Cape Town & grand Rapids: David Philip/W B Eerdmans, 1986), 51-65.
- 19 Randolph Vigne, *Liberals Against Apartheid: A History of the Liberal Party of South Africa, 1953-1968* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998).
- 20 Janet Robertson, *Liberalism in South Africa, 1948-1963* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).
- 21 Hugh Brogan, 'The Biographer's Claims', in Eric Homberger & John Charmley (eds.), *The Troubled Face of Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 111-112.