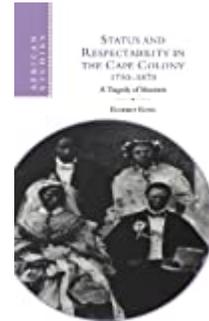


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Robert Ross. *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony 1750-1870: A Tragedy of Manners.* African Studies Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xii + 203 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-62122-9.



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Robert Ross needs little introduction to scholars of South African history. In his current book, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony*, he considers links between a number of issues which, according to his own admission, have engaged him since he first began work on South Africa in the 1970s. These range from the nature of slavery to more recent contributions on the importance of middle-class identity and gender to the shaping of colonial societies. The book, therefore, both contains primary research and reflects some of the changing currents in South African colonial historiography over the past few decades.

Status and Respectability is concerned with documenting the place of both ideas about, and the performance of, hegemonic behaviour amongst first the Dutch and later the British administration at the Cape. Ross argues that “gentility and respectability, were central to the history of nineteenth-century colonial South Africa” (p. 77) and shows how access to power and status were predicated upon the attainment of these. For Ross, the ultimate indicator of status lay in political representation guaranteed under the constitution of 1853, and the book is geared towards showing how respectable identity contributed to the attainment of this. The focus on behaviour leads Ross to refer to the book as “a semiotic history of the Cape”, (p. 3; a discussion of seven key propositions

is given on p. 4). In order to construct his argument he looks at how ideas concerning gender, ethnicity, and Christianity both manifested themselves materially and helped to determine access to respectable status. Drunkenness, immorality, and Islam are also discussed as markers of the antithesis of this status.

The first chapter, the introduction, contains Ross’s discussion of his approach, as well as a brief history of European settlement at the Cape. This serves to set the parameters of this study—its beginning in 1652 with settlement under the Dutch, until the awarding of representative government to the Cape’s male citizens in 1853. In the second chapter Ross discusses the distribution of status at the Cape under the VOC (Dutch East India Company). The observance of social hierarchy was marked externally, via clothing at the one extreme and ritual physical punishment in public view at the other. Personal status, for instance, was preserved through careful observance of rules relating to position within a funeral procession. The need to make status visible meant that free blacks (manumitted slaves) were assigned to special militia because of their ineligibility to join the regular burghers’ colonial force. However, and paradoxically, the stain of colour washed out within a generation, so that colour was less of a criterion for status than other factors. The attempt to elucidate exactly when colour

became an issue for the assignment of status in South African colonial history is one of Ross's key sub-themes.

Chapter Three concerns the way in which the English, who ruled from 1795, introduced an English nationalism against which all future nationalisms in South Africa were to be measured (p. 43). Despite the initial British degradation of Dutch social life and culture, the Cape Dutch elite was prepared to assimilate to British rule because it was often beneficial to them. Ross indicates that a Cape Dutch ethnicity was beginning to emerge at this point, but that it was not an ethnicity that required marshalling on a political level. Instead it emerged in religious matters and public discourse. Where it came to anglicanisation, specifically of the law and with respect to teaching, most Cape Dutch families were in agreement with change. More opposition to the state would emerge from the community of English who arrived at settlers in 1820. This mixed group would help to shape a growing settler-oriented nationalism in the Eastern Cape over the next few decades.

The content of respectability (the chapter's title) is next discussed. Here Ross pays particular attention to the relationship of gender to behaviour. "A gentleman could do things which a lady could not, and a lady could be things which a gentleman could not ... more importantly, though, these were a complementary pair. Together, they formed a part of a wider set of rules for conduct, ideologies of behaviour and self-images" (p. 77). The chapter then concerns itself with an exposition of this statement, examining housing, clothing, and education. These provided the outward signs for people to be able to distinguish between the respectable (middle-class but lower income) and genteel (the same with higher income); and those who were not. The antithesis of non-respectable status is covered in Chapter Six, where Ross discusses behaviour and practices like drunkenness and prostitution which did not accord with respectable ideals. The ascription of non-respectable status to people who behaved, for instance, in a drunken manner, was often more a reflection of stereotypes relating to class and race, so that increasingly during the nineteenth century it was impossible for respectable society to see behaviour such as drunkenness as something unconnected to colour. Ross's attempt to write a semiotic history of the Cape comes out most forcefully in this discussion. The coherence of his argument here is a reminder to those historians who discount the importance of material culture in shaping social relations.

The role of religious belief, adherence, and denom-

inational following in both constituting and being constitutive of status is discussed in Chapter Five. European, slave, and Khoikhoi understandings of baptism hinged on the idea that baptism was synonymous with entry into respectable society. For some, notably Dutch farmers, slave baptism was anathema because, according to the Synod of Dort, baptised slaves were unable to be sold. This issue was contentious enough for the rule to be changed in favour of selling under British administration in 1812 (p. 97). A profession of Christianity for slaves, free blacks and the Khoikhoi under both the VOC and the British was a challenge to European ideas about connections between Christian descent and civilisation. The potency of this assumption was confirmed by the opportunities for advancement, on a number of fronts, which Christianity offered to new professors after the initiation of concerted European mission effort from the late-eighteenth century. On firstly Moravian and later (principally British) non-conformist mission stations Africans, Khoikhoi, free blacks and ex-slaves were exposed to Christian teachings which emphasised individual liberty as a pre-requisite for the exercise of faith. A profession of Christianity (measured by the exhibition of 'civilised character') became conjoined with respectability and loyalty to the British state as a guarantor of political advancement (p. 119).

Here and in Chapter Seven Ross underscores the importance of Christianity to the development of a Cape liberal tradition, one which emphasised Britishness—defined by respectability amongst other things—but made room via Christianity for a political dispensation that did not define membership according to race. The issues represented in the discussion of previous chapters, reflecting a 'deep politics' (which draws from John Lonsdale's and Bruce Berman's formulation) were expressed in political conflict surrounding the franchise in the early-1850s. Ross pits the inherent conservatism and incipient racism of a faction represented by Eastern Cape settlers against the liberalism of people like John Fairbairn and William Porter. The importance of the outcome of this struggle—representative government with a low franchise qualification—is reflected in the efforts to which subsequent governments went to remove the franchise qualification.

Discussion of the franchise at the end of the book, therefore, serves to underscore the point towards which Ross's semiotic history has been drawing. Connections between identity and power are not surprising, given their relative status in Ross's previous work. Some of Ross's earliest work was on group identity (both white

and black), and identity as a political force. By the early 1990s he had begun to address the role of material culture in history.[1] More recently Ross has been involved in projects around mission history, Khoikhoi identity and the fashioning of Respectability_ but it is the last which forms a fulcrum for the others.

Cape liberalism is a theme with which Ross has been working for a while, and in particular with its defence. This is marked in his review of Tim Keegan's *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* published in 1996.[2] Keegan's book is, very briefly, an analysis of the place of Eastern Cape and settler efforts in the formation of a racial order in South Africa.[3] In his review, Ross writes that "Keegan's plot, a debunking of liberal pretensions in favour of self-interest and the establishment of a racial order, does not allow for the survival and spread of liberal ideals among those who believed that they had been promised incorporation and equality. The mission converts of the period before 1850 might have been disappointed and disillusioned. The line from them, and from the early missionaries, to the African elite of the late nineteenth century, is clear (p.283 of the review)."

This statement is very important, because it marks Ross's effort to address the history of Cape liberalism and its origins in Christianity from a subaltern perspective. The role of Christianity in promoting an individual rights-based political culture (p.153), as a component of the Cape liberal tradition, has been underestimated. A burgeoning literature from the 1990s, on both African agency and African-initiated Christianity, has emphasised this point. Most of it though, does not take the influence of Christianity (shorthand for a convoluted and ambivalent package) as far back as Ross. In effect, Ross is revisiting a much earlier historiographical tradition, out of favour by the 1970s, in his list of attributions to the Cape liberal tradition. However, I think that the book does not do Ross's argument as much credit as it might. His argument hinges on the meaning of the franchise to the Khoikhoi and, later, Africans themselves (it is the fo-

cus on African agency which tends to be the definitive feature of the more recent historiography on Cape liberalism). But in a book the length of this one—161 pages excluding its introduction and conclusion—the space necessary for explanation of this, given everything else Ross set out to do, was not possible.

As a result Ross imposes a somewhat teleological framework upon the outcome of Cape liberalism. In a discussion of Kat River Khoikhoi sentiments in 1834, he writes that 'From Dirk Hatha and Andries Stoffels through Sol Plaatje and the early ANC, Anton Lembede and the Youth League, Steve Biko and Black Consciousness to the revolts of the 1980s and the great transformation of the 1990s, black nationalisms in South Africa have always been an assertion of individual self-determination and a rejection of servility' (p. 153).

This statement could do with more unpacking, if only because it is such a supremely important one. Where is the detail of these black nationalisms? How was continuity between them established? What are the links between black nationalisms. These kinds of questions are of contemporary relevance and it is to be hoped that both Ross and others (as may be his intention) will participate in further debate around them. In the meantime I would suggest readers consult both Ross's previous work and some of the work to which he refers in his introduction in order to expand upon these and the other themes of his book.

Notes

[1]. For example, Robert Ross, 'The Top-Hat in South African History: the Changing Significance of an Article of Material Culture', *Social Dynamics*, 16 (1990) 90-100.

[2]. Tim Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1996).

[3]. 'Grahamstown versus Cape Town: Review Article', *South African Historical Journal*, 36 (1997) 277-283.

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