

# H-Net Reviews

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**Paul Maylam.** *South Africa's Racial Past: The History and Historiography of Racism, Segregation and Apartheid.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001. 264 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-1788-4.



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Paul Maylam, Professor of History at Rhodes University, is well-known for his survey of the history of (black) African people in South Africa.[1] More recently he has co-edited a book on the history of Durban and written a number of seminal articles on urban segregation in South Africa.[2] Now he has produced another bold, clearly-written and stimulating survey, this time on the role of race in South African history, from the beginnings of European colonisation in the 1650s to the end of white rule in the 1990s.

While race has, of course, loomed large in many histories of South Africa, this is the first survey of its kind. (The closest approximation is perhaps the South African sections of George Fredrickson's *White Supremacy*.) That this is the first such survey is not as surprising as it may at first seem when it is remembered that during the apartheid era an emphasis on race became unfashionable; during the 1970s and 1980s in particular, there was a downplaying of race by radical opponents of apartheid. For all that one might wish that race as a category could be ignored, however, the central importance of race in South African history cannot be denied, and aspects of its role in different centuries were treated by such well-known historians as Richard Elphick, Hermann Giliomee, Robert Ross, Fredrickson, the late Jack Cell, Martin Legassick and Shula Marks. Maylam also

draws upon more recent work on the theme of race by such historians as Andrew Bank, Vivian Bickford-Smith, Tim Keegan, and, especially, Saul Dubow. (Those in that second list of names all studied or taught at the University of Cape Town, which may not be coincidental.) Since the collapse of the apartheid regime, race has become a fashionable topic for study—the July 2001 University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop was devoted to the theme of 'The Burden of Race? "Whiteness" and "Blackness" in Modern South Africa'—at a time when there is much public concern in South Africa with racism, and when President Mbeki joins others in playing the race card against those who challenge his policies.[3]

Maylam has chosen to discuss race in South African history very largely from a historiographical point of view. Some of the ground he covers is not new—for example, my monograph published in the late 1980s, now out of print, traced race in the writing of major historians writing in English from George McCall Theal to the revisionists of the 1970s [4]—but Maylam is the first to trace race and racism, not in the writing of a number of specific historians, but through the evolution of 'the racial order' (a term subjected to some questioning below). His book is particularly useful because he constantly raises key historiographical questions, relating for example to the form of racial rule, the reasons for white racism, and

how and why racial attitudes and policies changed over time. As befits a professional historian, he has a strong sense of the importance of periodization and is aware that almost any generalisation has to be qualified. He knows how difficult it is to produce answers to the questions he asks, and is prepared to admit that there is often no easy or straightforward answer. He modestly calls his book a 'stock-taking exercise' (p. 5), but besides 'taking stock', he gives his own views on many key questions, and points to gaps in the relevant literature. At one point, he wonders whether his book 'may bring more confusion than clarity' (p. 10), but there is no doubt that it does not, for there is no clearer discussion anywhere of many of the issues he deals with.

Maylam divides his book into three parts. The first is devoted to the pre-industrial period. He begins before Van Riebeeck with the early European legacy. He goes on to examine Leonard Guelke's argument that the Dutch brought their prejudices with them to the Cape, and asks whether the sense of identity of the Dutch colonists was shaped more by religion than race. He raises the question of the relationship of racism and slavery, pointing out that the heartland of slavery, the first area to be colonised, was also the heartland of South African liberalism. He concludes that the role of slavery in the making of 'the racial order' remains 'open to question and further research' (p. 51). He then examines the 'frontier thesis', adapted by Eric Walker from Frederick Jackson Turner's famous essay on the American frontier, and points out that while some liberal historians stressed how the frontier bred isolation and white racism, Monica Wilson and others writing in the 1960s viewed it rather as a zone of interaction of mostly peaceful kinds between colonists and indigenous people. More recently, historians have reverted to the idea of seeing the frontier as a zone of racial exclusiveness and domination, and Maylam accepts that those who argued otherwise overstated their case (p. 65). He then turns to the era of British imperialism in the nineteenth century. Here he points out that while Ordinance 50 and the emancipation of slaves brought a measure of freedom to the formerly servile or enslaved persons, they did not mean deracialisation. He emphasises the racism of the 1820 settlers in the eastern Cape, and of some British governors, most notoriously Sir Harry Smith. He raises the idea that the end of slavery may have helped heighten racial ideology (p. 87), and goes on to reject the idea that the origins of apartheid are to be found in the racism of the republics in the interior.

The second part of the book focuses on the industrial era, from the discovery of diamonds and gold to

the present. He asks how important the mineral revolution was in shaping the racial order of modern South Africa, and devotes chapters to 'the segregation era' and apartheid respectively. In the latter, he argues that John Omer-Cooper and others have overstated the significance of 1948, and drawn too sharp a contrast between the policies of the United and National parties in the late 1940s (p. 189). He accepts recent scholarship that argues that there was no apartheid 'grand plan', and that Verwoerd was more pragmatist than ideologue. 'Grand Apartheid' was not 'total apartheid' (p. 195). He agrees that the racial order 'reached its zenith in the 1960s', and that the ideology changed fundamentally in the 1970s, to one of 'total strategy' (pp. 203-4).

The third part consists of a chapter of mainly historiographical discussion and reflections, in which he comments, in turn, on Afrikaner nationalist, liberal, revisionist and post-modernist approaches to explaining South Africa's 'racial order'. Here he returns to some of his earlier themes, stressing again that white English-speakers and British imperial officials were as significant in the making of the 'racial order' as Dutch/Boers/Afrikaners (p. 216). He then explicitly addresses periodisation and culpability, maintaining that it is 'not a useful historical exercise to apportion blame to particular individuals or groups' (234). In conclusion, he again addresses the reasons for the extraordinary racial history he has traced. While he is convinced of the importance of material interests, he accepts that white racism cannot be reduced to such interests. In his final pages he stresses the importance of 'ever-present' white fear, which is 'still very much alive, and...now expressed in a less overt, more implicit racial discourse centred on crime, corruption and incompetence' (p. 243).

While Maylam's approach to most of the topics he discusses is on the whole admirably clear and sensible, many readers will wish to take issue with at least some aspects of his text. In such an overview, he obviously did not have the space to treat any period in depth. His book is an original work of synthesis, not one that rests on new primary research. While he has read very widely in the literature on race in South Africa and elsewhere, there are, inevitably, omissions and gaps. Let me mention a few of the queries I noted down while reading his book.

Maylam uses the term 'the racial order' throughout. When he comes to explaining what he means by it, he says that it comprises four main elements (pp. 7-8, 233): racial consciousness (and he makes clear that he is only

concerned with whites, and not with, say, the attitudes of some blacks to others; there is nothing in his book on black race consciousness); racial theory; informal racial practice; and formalised racial policy. Not all four elements are necessary for a 'racial order' to exist, so that in the 'racial order' of the eighteenth century, for example, there was no body of racial theory and no formalised racial policy. Maylam traces the emergence of a 'formalised racial order', which did include all four elements, by the early twentieth century. Since 1994, with 'the racial order largely dismantled' (p. 233), we are back where the country was in the eighteenth century, with racial theory having disappeared, along with an 'entrenched, formalised racial order' (pp. 3, 243). Maylam is well-aware that racial thinking and informal racial practices continue in the early twenty-first century (pp. 8, 243), but he does not explore this in any detail.

Not only is his use of 'racial order' vague; though he is conscious of the dangers of a teleological approach, his use of the term suggests a hardening over time. And for all the nuance and complexity that he introduces, many readers will probably find his survey—perhaps inevitably in a text of fewer than two hundred and fifty pages—too brief and sketchy to adequately treat any of the major issues it raises.

Another account might examine the ideas the early Dutch settlers brought, not only from the Netherlands but, perhaps more crucially, from Indonesia and the east. It would probably relate the emergence of racial theory to the anti-slavery movement, and draw on scholarship—such as Andrew Ross's life of John Philip [5]—that stresses the importance of the 1840s as an era that saw harsher racial thinking introduced from Britain. Maylam does usefully remind us of the virulent racism of the 1820 settlers in the Eastern Cape, and of British governors of the Cape, but he seems to suggest that evidence of such racism somehow negates the significance of the alternative tradition at the Cape, critical of the racism of the day. The remarkable thing about the mid-nineteenth century Cape, in the context of South African history as a whole, was the extent to which race was downplayed, not only in legislation but also to some extent in practice as well. Maylam is, in my view, too concerned to point to the similarities—and many they were—between the Cape and the other white-ruled states of late nineteenth century South Africa, and too reluctant to emphasise the differences. The emergent black elite at the end of the nineteenth century did not believe that the British were as racist as the rulers of the republics.[6] I would have liked to see more emphasis on the alternative tradi-

tion, present in South Africa in different forms from the early nineteenth century Cape to the end of apartheid, as well as more consideration of arguments that Britain itself was not totally unconcerned about black rights, such that the non-inclusion of the High Commission territories in Union in 1909 was in part a result of concern for black interests.[7]

Though Maylam is very well placed to write about what he calls, even for the period long before 1948, 'urban apartheid', one may question aspects of his treatment of segregation. He does not emphasise how it was seen by many of its advocates as a protective device, quite different from, and far superior to, mere repression. He acknowledges the importance of materialist explanations for the development of urban segregation, yet accords high praise to Swanson's 'sanitation syndrome' argument. Within a few weeks of the arrival of the 'black death' (plague) in Cape Town, he writes, the Africans were removed from the central city area to Ndabeni. Their removal certainly followed the arrival of the plague, but the 'sanitation syndrome' was more justification than reason for urban segregation. Most Africans were already living in de facto segregated quarters in Cape Town before they were moved to the outskirts of the city, and the city authorities seized upon the advent of the plague to do what they had been planning to do anyway, as I pointed out over twenty years ago, in a paper Maylam does not cite.[8]

Maylam's book is always stimulating, and deserves a wide readership. As it will be especially valuable for students, it is to be hoped that its publication in hard-back, at a price that will put it out of reach of most libraries in South Africa, let alone individuals, will soon be followed by its publication in relatively inexpensive paperback format.

#### Notes

[1]. P. Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1986).

[2]. P. Maylam, 'The Rise and Decline of Urban Apartheid', *African Affairs* No. 89 (1990); 'Explaining the Apartheid City: 20 Years of South African Urban Historiography', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 21 (1995); P. Maylam and I. Edwards, eds., *A People's City* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996).

[3]. T. Mbeki, e-journal *ANC Today*, Vol. 1, no. 43, 16-22 November 2001.

[4]. C. Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past*.

*Major Historians on Race and Class* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988).

[5]. A. Ross, *John Philip, 1775-1851: Missions, Race, and Politics in South Africa* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986).

[6]. C. Saunders, 'African Attitudes to Britain and the Empire before and after the South African War', in D.Lowry, ed., *The South African War Reappraised* (Manch-

ester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

[7]. R. Hyam, 'African Interests and the South Africa Act 1908-1910' in *Historical Journal* Vol. 13 (1970).

[8]. C. Saunders, 'The Creation of Ndabeni: Urban Segregation and African Resistance in Cape Town', in *Studies in the History of Cape Town* vol. 1 (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1979).

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