

Consensus or Hegemony?

Constructing a National History and Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa

by Gary Barnes

The recasting of history and public memory in post-apartheid South Africa is a political project. The transfer of power from a white minority to a black majority has been accompanied by attempts to renegotiate the meaning of our past. Previously dominant perspectives have been challenged and new narratives are being constructed in order to realign collective memory with a new national identity. The nation-building project has been characterised by a quest for consensus history. This imperative is exemplified by the report of the Truth & Reconciliation Committee (TRC) that sought to construct a shared past for the sake of reconciliation. It is also typified by those heritage projects that seek to promote a common history which glosses over past divisions and the faultlines in post-apartheid society. Proponents of consensus history assume – incorrectly in my view – that differences of opinion are inimical to the nation-building project.

Whereas consensus history promotes a bland, sanitized national narrative with wide appeal, hegemonic history privileges the story and legitimizes the power of the new ruling elite. It accepts at face value the conventional wisdom that winners get to write the history. The corollary in South Africa is that the ruling ANC will ensure that its version of the past becomes dominant. It is assumed that the government will monopolize the media and impose its version of the past on the school curriculum. In addition, the ANC government's declaration of public holidays and sponsorship of memorial sites are regarded as signifiers of its historic-political agenda. It is also reckoned that projects such as SADET provide a semi-official history that treats the liberation struggle as the master narrative of our national history. However, hegemonic narratives are always contested, and there is no guarantee that the liberation struggle and its pantheon of heroes will remain sacrosanct, especially as a new generation comes of age. Nor is it inevitable that the victors – or liberators – will have the last word in how South Africa's past is remembered.

This paper will examine the limitations and pitfalls of consensus and hegemonic histories. It will contend that neither should be reified. Rather, it will suggest that South Africa needs a multiplicity of stories about the past. It proclaims the complementarity of historical and political pluralism. For contestation about the past is a normal – even necessary – occurrence in the practice of democracy. Accordingly, we should develop the institutions and structures to manage conflict, and seek to create a robust democratic culture where differences are not simply tolerated but cherished.

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