

## Die relevansie van historiese insig

Historiese insig is geneig om buitengewoon relevant op die mees onverwagte tye te wees. Die skielike ineenstorting van die ideologiese verdeling tussen oos en wes in 1989 is 'n goeie voorbeeld. Terwyl die gebeure plaasgevind het, was historici op die voorpunt met die formulering van waardevolle insigte wat op kousale historiese verbande gebaseer was. Ons wil graag dink dat hulle aan persepsies gestalte gegee het oor die brawe nuwe wêreld wat ons besig was om te betree.

Sedert 1989 het substantiewe veranderinge plaasgevind. Dit is egter redelik om te aanvaar dat die gebeure van 11 September 2001 sedertdien seker een van die mees betekenisgewende historiese tendense blootgelê het. Die aanvalle op die World Trade Centre in New York en die Pentagon in Washington, binne die bestek van 'n uur (tussen 14:40 en 15:40 Suid-Afrikaanse tyd) het 'n nuwe era ingelui. Omdat die gebeure miskien so onlangs plaasgevind het, kan historici tans weer eens (soos in 1989) net die implikasies oorpeins.

Ten einde die formulering van historiese idees te stimuleer – en ook die waarde van eietydse geskiedenis te beklemtoon – publiseer die redaksie van *Historia* in hierdie uitgawe 'n opstel van prof. Walter A. McDougall, 'n gerespekteerde diplomatieke historikus van die Universiteit van Pennsylvania wat elektronies in *Wire*<sup>1</sup> deur die Foreign Policy Institute in die Verenigde State van Amerika vir 'n groep spesialiste gepubliseer is.

Hy skryf as akademikus en Amerikaanse burger. Sy perspektief, veral as historikus, is van besonder belang vir ons. Hy maak 'n aantal insiggewende stellings wat besinning regverdig.

Vir Suid-Afrikaanse historici is daar heelwat stof tot nadenke wanneer onlangse interpretasies van die nasionale staatsverskynsel en die toekomstige globale samelewing in oënskou geneem word. Dit is van besonder groot waarde omdat persepsies oor die gebruik van geskiedenis in die opvoedkundige omgewing daardeur geraak word. Nog meer, ons word bewus van hoe noodsaaklik dit is om die beginsel van 'n sinvolle en morele burgerlike samelewing te respekteer.

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1. *Wire*, 9(7), Oktober 2001. 'n Meer omvattende weergawe van die opstel sal in Desember 2001 verskyn in *Orbis, A Journal of World Affairs*.

*Historia* 46(2), November 2001, pp. 297-300.

## Globalisering en die sin van ‘n ‘universele identikit’

Richard Rorty het reeds in die vorige eeu homself as volg oor die globaliseringsproses uitgelaat:

We are in danger of winding up with only two genuinely international social groups: the super-rich and the intellectuals, that is the people who attend international conferences devoted to measuring the harm being done by their fellow cosmopolitans.<sup>2</sup>

As ons die breë stroom van die geskiedenis in oorweging neem wat in die nuwe millennium ontvou het, wil dit voorkom asof daar iets is wat in ons beoordeling van globalisering skort – gewone mense en ‘n begrip vir kulturele betekenisgewing.

Dit is ‘n ope vraag in hoeverre ‘n empiriese benadering bevredigend is in pogings om die verlede, die hede en die prosesse wat nog gaan posvat, te verstaan. Wat eintlik gebeur is dat die indruk posvat dat globalisering ‘n proses is wat akademies-geformuleerde patrone en tendense vereis om die identiteit van die kosmiese individu in ‘n universele samelewing te bepaal. Dit mag selfs moontlik wees om te praat van ‘n *identikit* – geïnspireer deur die modernistiese konseptuele teorie in krimonilogie – om ‘n indruk van die gewenste/ongewenste mens te kry.

Dit is sinvol om geskiedenis in terme van klas, geslag en ras aan te spreek. Daar bestaan egter dieperliggend ook ‘n basiese behoefte vir meer diversifikasie.

Saam met ons begrip van kontemporêre globaliseringsprosesse is dit nodig om dieper te konsentreer op die verskynsel van kultuur in die konteks van ‘n sensitiewe en gesofistikeerde kultuurgeskiedenis van die samelewing op die mikrovlak van dinamiek. Op hierdie manier mag dit moontlik wees om tot ‘n grondiger insig te kom van die betekenisvolle kragte wat aanwesig is en ons gemeenskaplike lotgevalle van die plaaslike tot die globale vlak vorm.

As ons daartoe in staat is om ‘n indruk te kry van die vergange kulturele landskap en die alledaagse akteurs – en die gemeenskap saam neem wanneer ons dit probeer verstaan – mag daar groter waardering vir ‘n blywende globale ineenskakelingsproses wees.

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2. R. RORTY, *Philosophy and social hope* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1999), p. 233.

## ‘n Geskiedenis-konsortium?

Daar was in onlangse jare geleentheidsgesprekke tussen lede van die Historiese Genootskap van Suid-Afrika en die Suid-Afrikaanse Historiese Vereniging oor die moontlikheid van nouer samewerking – selfs moontlik ineenmelting.

Op die voetsoolvlak wil dit voorkom asof samewerking tussen die twee verenigings ‘n gewilde besprekingsonderwerp is by konferensies en wanneer historici mekaar toevallig in boekwinkels of by formele byeenkomste raakloop.

Die terugvoer wat ons kry is dat heelwat meer gedoen moet word om die saak verder te voer.

Indien daar apatie onder historici bestaan, kan verskeie redes vir die toedrag van sake gegee word. Die mees opvallende is dat in die akademiese omgewing is die studie en beoefening van Geskiedenis tans ‘n slagveld waar terme soos “rasionalisering”, “uitkomsgebaseerde benaderings”, “inkorting”, “vervroegde pensioen” en “die verwagte winsgewendheid van studente-subsidies” baie aandag geniet.

Die gevolg is dat personeel aan departemente Geskiedenis by universiteite, waar daar groot werksdrukte bestaan, geneig is om onder moeilike omstandighede hulself eerder op onderrigwerk, konferensievoordragte en navorsingsverslae toe te spits.

Die huidige toedrag van sake is vreemd, gegewe die feit dat die regering onlangs duidelik blyke gegee het dat daar steun vir akademiese Geskiedenis is. Provinsiale onderwysdepartemente het juis beurse vir voor- en nagraadse studies aan universiteite in 2002 beskikbaar gestel.

Miskien behoort die historiese gemeenskap in Suid-Afrika die toestand net op ‘n ander manier aan te spreek. Onlangs het ‘n groep Amerikaanse historici, oor ideologiese skeidslyne heen, gesprek gevoer oor die blywende waarde van die verlede. Hulle het as professionele akademici sinvolle interpretasies van die heersende toestand en status van geskiedenis in die samelewing gemaak. Hulle het selfs ‘n nuwe historiese vereniging gestig.<sup>3</sup>

In welke mate ‘n soortgelyke ontwikkeling in Suid-Afrika kan plaasvind, is oop vir bespiegeling. Dat daar ‘n behoefte bestaan vir samewerking, ly geen twyfel nie.

Een vertrekpunt sou wees om kennis te neem van die feit dat verskeie verenigings en akademiese dissiplines onder die gemeenskaplike noemer van geskiedenis saamgesnoer kan word.

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3 . E. FOX-GENOVESE en E. LASCH-QUINN (Eds.), *Reconstructing history: the emergence of a new historical society* (Routledge, New York, 1999).

*Historia* 46(2), November 2001, pp. 297-300.

Suid-Afrikaanse historici, ongeag hul spesifieke terreine van spesialisering – dit kan wees regsgeeskiedenis, ekonomiese geskiedenis, kunsgeskiedenis, argeologie, of natuurgeskiedenis – het nodig om te begin saamwerk.

In die Verenigde State van Amerika is ‘n geskiedenis-konsortium tot stand gebring. In dié besondere opset word in die besonder aan die saamsnoering van vaardighede, publikasies, navorsingswerk en heelwat organisatoriese ondernemings aandag geskenk. Miskien kan ons hulle voorbeeld volg.

Die bestuur van die Historiese Genootskap van Suid-Afrika het onlangs planne in werking gestel om komitees van lede te skep wat beter skakeling en samewerking tussen historici kan bevorder. (Kyk in die *Nuusafdeling* in hierdie uitgawe van *Historia*). Die tyd mag leer dat hierdie ‘n stap in die regte rigting is.

## *Historia* op die WWW

In die tweede semester van 2001 het die redaksie van *Historia* daarin geslaag om met die hulp van ‘n kommersiële inligtingsdiens (Sabinet) die tydskrif in die kuberruimte beskikbaar te stel.

Die tydskrif kan nou ook elektronies gelees word by

<http://journals.sabinet.co.za/hist/>

Ons vertrou ons lesers sal die diens nuttig vind.

Toegang tot die webwerf is tans gratis. In die afsienbare toekoms sal die tydskrif net deur intekenare en lede van die genootskap elektronies gelees kan word.

## The relevance of historical insight

Historical insight has a tendency to be of great significance at the most unexpected times. The sudden collapse of the ideological divide between east and west in 1989 is a case in point. At the time of the events unfolding historians were at the forefront of formulating valuable insights on the causal connectivity of historical trends. We would like to believe they helped shape perceptions of the brave new world we were about to enter.

There have been substantive changes since 1989. It seems however reasonable to claim that the events of 11 September 2001 were, since that time probably globally the most historically significant. The attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, within the space of one hour (between 14:40 and 15:40 South African time) augured in a new era. At this point in time (as was the case in 1989) the events can only be contemplated because of their recent origin.

In order to stimulate historical ideas on the matter – and also accentuate the value of contemporary history – the editorial staff of *Historia* in this edition publish an essay by Prof. Walter A. McDougall, a diplomatic historian of the University of Pennsylvania. It was recently published electronically in *Wire*<sup>1</sup> by the Foreign Policy Institute in the United States of America for a select readership.

He writes as an academic and an American citizen. His perspective as historian is of particular interest to us. He makes a number of significant statements that deserve our consideration.

For South African historians there is considerable food for thought as we ponder on recent interpretations of the phenomenon of the national state in global society. It is also of interest because it can influence perceptions of the uses of history in the educational environment. Moreover it makes us more aware of how important it is to respect the principle of a meaningful and moral civil society.

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1 . *Wire*, 9(7), October 2001. A more comprehensive version of the essay is scheduled for publication in *Orbis, A Journal of World Affairs* in December 2001.

## Globalization and the sensibility of a ‘universal identikit’

Richard Rorty, in the previous century, remarked on the process of globalization:

We are in danger of winding up with only two genuinely international social groups: the super-rich and the intellectuals, that is the people who attend international conferences devoted to measuring the harm being done by their fellow cosmopolitans.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the history that has unfolded in the new millennium it does appear as if something is amiss in our appraisal of globalization – ordinary people and a sense of cultural signification.

It is an open question if and whether an empiricist approach is satisfactory in attempts aimed at understanding the past, the present and the processes of change that are bound to take place. What is in fact happening is the impression that globalization is a process that requires academically formulated patterns and trends to determine the identity of the cosmic individual in a universal society. It may even be possible to speak of an *identikit* – inspired by the modernist conceptual theory in criminology – to form an impression of a desirable/undesirable human being.

It makes sense to study history in terms of class, gender and race. Deeper down however there appears to be a basic need for greater diversification.

Along with our understanding of contemporary global processes, it is necessary to take a deeper look at the phenomenon of culture in the context of a sensitive and sophisticated cultural history of society on the micro-dynamic level. In this manner it may just be possible to come to a more profound understanding of the meaningful forces that are afoot, shaping our common destiny from the local to the global level.

If we can create an impression of the past cultural landscape and its everyday actors – and take the community along in the process of trying to understand it – there may be more appreciation for a lasting global interface.

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2 . R. RORTY, *Philosophy and social hope* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1999), p. 233.

## A history consortium?

There have in recent years been intermittent discussions between members of the Historical Association of South Africa and the South African Historical Society about the potential of closer collaboration – even perhaps a merger.

At the grassroots level it appears as if co-operation between the two societies is a very popular discussion topic at conferences and when academic historians chance upon one another in the course of incidental meetings at bookshops or formal get togethers.

The feedback we get is that much more needs to be done to push the issue more to the foreground.

If there are indications of an apparent apathy amongst historians, there are numerous reasons for this state of affairs. The most apparent is that in the academic environment the study and pursuit of History is currently a battlefield where terms such as “rationalization”, “outcomes based approaches”, “retrenchment”, “early retirement” and “the anticipated profitability of student subsidies” appear to enjoy most attention.

The result is that people in understaffed departments of History at universities tend to confine them to teaching, writing conference papers and completing research reports under difficult circumstances.

The current state of affairs is strange, given the fact that the government recently gave a firm indication that it supports academic History. Provincial departments of education have made available bursaries for students to study History on under- and postgraduate levels in 2002.

It may just be that the historical fraternity in South Africa should be addressing the situation in a different manner. Recently a number of American historians, across the ideological divide, held discussions to address the abiding significance of the past. As professional historians they were able to make some substantive interpretations of the contemporary condition and status of history in society. They even founded a new historical society.<sup>3</sup>

To what extent a similar development is possible in South Africa, is uncertain. That there is a need for co-operation is certain.

One point of departure would be to take note of the fact that there are several societies and academic disciplines that can be grouped together under history as a common denominator.

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3. E. FOX-GENOVESE and E. LASCH-QUINN (Eds.), *Reconstructing history: the emergence of a new historical society* (Routledge, New York, 1999).

*Historia* 46(2), November 2001, pp. 301-4.

South African historians, irrespective of their particular fields of concentration – be it legal history, economic history, art history, archaeology, or natural history – need to start working together.

In the United States a History Consortium was founded. Special attention is given to pooling together skills, publications, research work and an array of organizational endeavours. Perhaps we can follow that example.

The management of the Historical Association of South Africa recently mooted plans to create committees of members to promote greater liaison and co-operation amongst historians. (See the *News section* in this edition of *Historia*). This may just prove to be a step in the right direction for a start.

### *Historia* on the WWW

In the second semester of 2001 the editorial staff of *Historia* were able, in conjunction with a commercial information company (Sabinet), to place the journal in cyberspace.

The journal can now be read electronically at

<http://journals.sabinet.co.za/hist/>

We trust our readers will find the service of value.

At present access to the website is free of charge. In the not too distant future only subscribers and members of the society will be able to electronically read the journal.