

One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories and Democracy Today

20-24 September 2011

Call for Papers:

The 100th anniversary of the African national conference in 2012 is, without question, a momentous event in South African and indeed African history. At many levels, it will also be the occasion for nationwide celebrations, extensive reflection and debate. Histories of the liberation struggle have now become inextricably bound to the questions of post-apartheid politics and the ideology of state power. Discussions of the ANC's past separate themselves with great difficulty from debates over the meaning of 'liberation', the developmental state, non-racialism, equality and social justice in the present.

Since 1994, a number of important books on the ANC (and the Congress movement in general) have appeared and public engagement with this history remains lively. But there are also worrying signs that a simplistic and elitist version of liberation history has solidified in the media, in government rhetoric, and in state-funded institutions such as museums. Recent anniversaries of signal events, particularly the 50th anniversary of the Sharpeville Massacre, have been marked by sharp debates both within and outside of the ANC over the role of other organizations in the struggle for freedom. Major attempts to provide comprehensive accounts of the struggle, for example SADET's *Road to Democracy* series, have proven both contentious and flawed. At the same time, significant elements and periods of the ANC's history remain unexplored because they do not contribute to legitimizing the politics of the current organization. The manner in which the government organizes commemorations—as celebrations of great figures or major events with little popular engagement over their meaning—has contributed to a growing cynicism about the significance of the past, especially among youth. This is also evident in the alarmingly low number of students pursuing historical studies at the secondary and university levels. A full acknowledgment of the ANC's tremendous achievements both before and after 1994 should not lead us to minimize this fact: we are facing a crisis in historical memory replete with dangers for public debate and democratic engagement.

But if there is increasing cynicism towards the grand narrative of the struggle, there has also been an explosion of historical interest in other areas. South Africa has seen a virtual flood of memoirs, biographies, and local histories by activists, family members, and community figures. This foregrounding of the local—whether it focuses on personal biography, family history, townships, or rural locations—has become the central mode of a post-apartheid struggle for visibility and, concomitantly, political recognition. It also has its own dangers, particularly a resurgence of race or ethnic-based histories under the aegis of historical recuperation.

In this spirit, South African History Online, the History Workshop (University of the Witwatersrand, JHB), and the Department of Historical Studies (University of Johannesburg) are organizing a major conference designed to inform the discussions around the 100th anniversary of the ANC. This event will promote a critical evaluation of the production and utilization of historical narratives by the ANC and the state, academic historians, and sectors of civil society and set the agenda for new energy and focus for further research into our past. We aim to create a forum that is both accessible and rigorous, and that brings academics, individuals from the ANC and other historic organizations, and intellectuals from civil society into reflective debate and discussion. This conference will include papers addressing the full range of organizations that have, at various conjunctures, constituted the Congress movement. It will also consider the importance of rival organizations who laid claim to continuity with the Congress tradition—like the Pan-Africanist Congress—or smaller groups who had an influence on the development of the ANC, like the Unity Movement. This conference also needs to reflect on the importance of Africa and the international community and its role in the shaping of South African freedom struggle.

We invite scholars, activists, struggle veterans, and community members to submit 250 word abstracts for papers or 500 word abstracts for panels that address one of the themes below. We welcome case studies or theoretical reflections, or combinations of the two.

1. **Local-Regional-National.** Local histories, particularly those drawing on vernacular language sources, have the greatest potential to revise an overly centralized, teleological version of struggle history. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done on how struggles were generated locally, who played a leadership role in these movements (local militants, religious leaders, trade unionists, and chiefs), what types

of structures they produced, and how these structures interacted and interfaced with the formal structures of liberation organizations. Much of this excavation requires exploring not only how gender dynamics function locally, but also how different constructions of the local versus the national are informed by ideas regarding proper masculine and feminine political roles. It also requires greater attention to the complex influence of rural power structures on Congress politics.

At the same time, the relationship between the local and regional—and what constitutes the regional in South African history—remains almost completely unexplored: no comprehensive, single volume history of the ANC and the Congress movement yet exists for any one region. An emphasis on regional history not only creates a space to examine some of the prevailing assumptions of the standard narrative (for example, the ‘unbroken thread’ of non-racialism), it also enables a focus on a number of actors—from traditional leaders to mid-level cadre to people who did not necessarily consider themselves as activists—often obscured at a greater scale.

2. Cycles of Ideological Contestation. Part of the historical strength of the Congress movement has been its enormous intellectual diversity. At various points, its discourses and ideologies have been informed by the politics of faith (Islam, Christianity and traditional African belief systems); the different traditions of Marxist and socialist theory; liberalism; Gandhian and Indian nationalism; ethnic politics; pan-Africanism; Black Consciousness; and feminism. In turn, the history of the Congress movement has been punctuated by periods of strong intellectual contestation (for example, around Africanism, Black Consciousness, or workerism) followed by the reassertion of an (adapted) ideological orthodoxy. While some of these currents have produced their own writings, it is often the case that their content remains unincorporated into the mainstream of Congress history. At the same time, we still know far too little about the contest and synthesis of ideas within the ANC; for instance the different manifestations of Christianity like black theology which have at various points contested or supported Congress politics. We also know too little about the different ways that Congress was imagined—and therefore reinvented—at local levels; and the genealogy of core ideas like ‘non-racialism’, ‘non-tribalism’, ‘African nationalism’, and ‘liberation’.

3. De-provincializing the Liberation Struggle. Despite sharp challenges in recent years, the historiography of the anti-apartheid struggle remains marked by a theoretical and empirical provincialism. Significant amounts of work still needs to be done on the transnational character of the liberation struggle, particularly the liberation organizations in Africa and South Asia. Perhaps more importantly, the interrelated character of the southern African liberation struggles against white settler colonialism deserves emphasis and exploration. We also need major efforts to draw South Africa’s historiography into a more sustained theoretical and comparative dialogue with the experience of liberation movements in Latin America, South Asia, and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. How do unexamined forms of nationalism continue to shape the writing of liberation history?

Place: Johannesburg

Abstracts Due: February 28th, 2011

Papers Due: May 31st, 2011

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This conference is part of *uKhongolose: The Hundred Years Struggle for Freedom*, a year-long series of conferences, exhibitions and workshops initiated by SA History Online in order to promote discussion and debate around the 100th Anniversary of the ANC. This project will also include a major research initiative and the online publication of substantial new materials. To explore this project, and for more information on the Johannesburg and other regional conferences, please go to <http://www.sahistory.org.za>

