

both emerged and proliferated since the early modern period. This is perhaps where we should look for the social origins of a critical, rather than simply sceptical and cynical, public—regardless of whether or not we remain sceptical on its critical pretensions.

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The Cape Town intellectuals: Ruth Schechter and her circle, 1907–1954

Baruch Hirson; The Merlin Press, Cape Town, 2001, xxxi + 253pp.

This fascinating if flawed work, part personal homage, part displaced autobiography and part study of provincial intellectual life in a society marked by deep social discord, is also a posthumous testimony to the remarkable career of its author, Baruch Hirson, who died aged after a long illness in 1999. Born in 1921, the son of turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrants from Latvia, Hirson grew up in Johannesburg and went on to pursue a career as a physicist at the University of the Witwatersrand. During the war years he became active in left-wing Zionist politics after which he progressed through a variety of splinter Trotskyist groupings to a life in revolutionary politics. Shortly after the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 he joined the tiny African Resistance Movement (whose links were to the Liberal Party and independent socialist groupings rather than the African National Congress) and was imprisoned for nine years in 1964 after being convicted for sabotage.

On his release in 1973 Hirson moved to London. During his time in gaol Hirson was able to read examples of the ‘new’ South African history which was coalescing in London, Oxford and Johannesburg at this time. Attracted by its intellectual excitement as well as its emancipatory potential, he duly turned himself into a historian and lecturer. Hirson’s academic development was inspired (guided would be too strong a word for a man who preferred to lay down rather than to toe the line) by Professor Shula Marks at London University and he became a frequent contributor to the lively postgraduate seminar that she founded and which played a central role in shaping new understandings of South African history over a period of three decades. A prodigious researcher and writer, invariably drawn to the obscure and the forgotten, Hirson became an enthusiastic historian while also running a small journal, *Searchlight*, which criticised without compromise

the ANC and South African Communist Party for current and past mistakes or deviations.

Over a period of more than two decades Hirson published a number of books and countless articles, ranging from a controversial history of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and an account of trade unionism in the 1930s and 1940s to an excellent biography of the Welsh-born social radical and founder of the South African Communist Party, David Ivon Jones, jointly written with Gwyn Williams. Always attracted to marginal political movements and proponents of lost causes, whose ‘correct’ political analysis was overlooked or betrayed by opportunists and compromisers, Hirson’s final historical passion focussed on the almost forgotten Cape Town journalist and literary figure, Ruth Schechter, and the circle of friends and associates amongst whom she moved.

Ruth Schechter was the daughter of Rabbi Solomon Schechter, a lively man of ideas, who lectured in Talmudic studies at Cambridge and whose wide circle of friends included the anthropologist James Frazer and historian of law F.W. Maitland. She came to Cape Town in 1908 as the young bride of Morris Alexander, already a prominent figure in Cape Jewish communal life and a respected liberal parliamentarian, whom she had first met in England as a young girl. Though somewhat staid and considerably older than Ruth, Morris Alexander offered her a comfortable bourgeois life in Cape Town not altogether dissimilar to the enlightened and humane, if socially conservative, households in which she had grown up in Cambridge and New York. But Ruth was soon frustrated by the smallness of Cape Town society and felt constrained by the limited horizons of the social enclave in which she found herself. She quickly sought out the company of more dangerous and radical spirits and forged friendships across the colour line in the racially mixed working class neighbourhood of District Six. In particular, she became a close friend and devotee of Olive Schreiner, the novelist and social critic renowned for her brilliant polemical writings, advocacy of the rights of women and of blacks, and brave campaigning against British imperialism. Another, more distant hero and acquaintance, was Mohandas Gandhi, who led the struggle for Indian rights in South Africa between 1893 and 1914.

Although still a small city, Cape Town was positioned at one of the nodal centres of the imperial periphery and its growing university attracted many ambitious intellectuals in the early stages of their careers (Cape Town University was jokingly referred to as the Scottish Mission to the Jews). By now a spirited social adventurer with a strong social conscience, Ruth was a central element in a social circle that included the zoologist and trenchant opponent of eugenicis, Lancelot Hogben, the historian Jean van der Poel (whose translation of the communist manifesto into Afrikaans is perhaps less appreciated than her professional compilation of Jan Smuts’s writings); the writer Laurens van der Post, the teacher Clare Goodlatte (known as the ‘red nun’); Frederick Bodmer, the linguist and author of *The Loom of Language*; and the Irish republican and classicist, Benjamin Farrington who joined the University of Cape Town in 1920. It was Ruth’s deepening relationship with Farrington that led to the breakup of her marriage and the gradual severing of her ties to family and religion. In 1933 the couple left South Africa for New York before

settling in Swansea in 1936, where Farrington became a classics professor. Ruth died in 1942, a member of the British Communist Party, aged 54.

Hirson has achieved a great deal in recovering neglected aspects of the intellectual, artistic and social milieu of Cape Town at a time when racial segregation was being imposed at a national level with ever more vigour. As in his other writings, Hirson has a strong appreciation, shaped by his marxist internationalism, of the flow of ideas that linked Africa to Europe and of their importance in shaping political action. Physically distant and to an extent insulated from the economic powerhouse of the Johannesburg, Cape Town's distinctive intellectual communities and traditions have often been accorded less attention than they deserve in historical accounts of twentieth century politics. Hirson's account helps us to recover some of Cape Town's singularity as a port city with strong European roots situated at the very tip of Africa. But his work represents only a beginning, and a partial one at that.

To my mind the book has two major problems. In the first place there are limitations in the documentary material available to the author, a difficulty not helped by the reluctance of Ruth's surviving family to assist with his enquiries. Much of the book contains extracts from her journalistic writings and commentaries on literary and social themes and these are grouped together in ways that do not cohere. As a result the reader gets only a fragmentary and fragmented account of Ruth's intellectual and political development. Had Hirson used Ruth as the entrypoint to a collective intellectual biography of the men and women whom she drew into her literary salon, the volume might have lived up to its title rather more convincingly.

Secondly, more could have been made of Ruth's private struggles as wife, mother, and lover. But, whether because of a paucity of evidence, or because of Hirson's own struggle to resolve his ingrained scepticism about the scope for personal agency with his growing fascination with intellectual biography, it is difficult to say. As in his own autobiography (*Revolutions in My Life*) the sections on Ruth's upbringing are much more satisfactorily realised than his account of her adult political life. Phrases like 'Ruth still had to acquire a broader perspective on African leadership' (p. 183) and 'Her political understanding had taken a big leap forward' (p. 184) betray Hirson's lifelong impulse to establish the correct analysis—a tendency which conflicts with his genuine sense of curiosity about people and ideas and his considerable powers of empathy. It might not be altogether unfair to suggest that Hirson, whose politics remained formed by the disputes and debates of Ruth's times, may have wondered whether he himself could have led her along the true socialist path.

Hirson succeeds in his primary task of rescuing Ruth from historical oblivion but the book does not fully deliver on its promises. Had the author not been suffering from an increasingly debilitating and painful disease from which died before being able to see the manuscript through the press, he may have been able to accomplish more. It may be trite to observe that *The Cape Town Intellectuals* says as much about its author as its subject since this is so often the case in historical biographies. But it would certainly not have been Hirson's intention to give the impression that I am left

with, namely, that the life of the biographer is in this instance more remarkable than that of its subject.

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Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology: the birth of modernity, 1880–1920

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When queried about the founders of modern sociology, most people will inevitably cite the names of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. Georg Simmel (1858–1918) would probably not rank amongst the founding members of the discipline. And though it is likely that almost everyone familiar with the development of sociological thought would accord Simmel a place of honour in the history of the discipline, it is equally true that few would be sure exactly where to situate him. Simmel's thought emerges in a transitional period in history and in the development of social and political ideas. It is a period marked by the crisis of philosophical idealism, the positivist turn of historical materialism, the rise of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences/humanities), *Lebensphilosophie*, and Husserl's phenomenology. The end of Simmel's life was marked by World War I and the turbulent years to follow, in which the social structures of pre-1914 Europe were shaken to their foundations. Simmel's thought is difficult to classify because his work touches on all of these fields of inquiry and events. *The Philosophy of Money* (1900) directly reflects his attempt to provide Marx's version of historical materialism with a solid philosophical underpinning. His *Sociology* of 1908 is informed by a series of Kantian meditations on the conditions of possibility of social scientific inquiry, encapsulated in the famous chapter 'How is Society Possible?' His later writings on the *Tragedy of Culture* (1912) and the *Vision of Life* (1917) register his increasing concern with Nietzsche, the struggle for new values, and the relationship between "life", on the one hand, and the attempt to give living thought objective form in theoretical concepts and social and political institutions, on the other.

Despite the complexity of Simmel's handling of these subjects, it is still somewhat surprising how little secondary literature has been concerned with explicating his oeuvre. In comparison with the volumes of material on Marx, Durkheim and Weber, Simmel's work has suffered an almost total exegetical neglect, especially in the English-speaking world. Thus Ralph M. Leck's study on the life and work of the Berlin-born philosopher of sociology is a welcome addition to David Frisby's work on Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin (*Fragments of Modernity*, 1986). Leck admirably provides both an analysis of Simmel's main ideas and a vivid