**POL 3013: SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**LECTURE 7: OLIVE SCHREINER’S MEDITERRANEAN**

**1. Schreiner on South Africa’s role in world history, 1908:** Schreiner’s *Closer Union* is a response to questions posed by a newspaper editor on the unification of South Africa, then being negotiated by white political leaders of the four British colonies (including two former Boer republics). But Schreiner responds to the questions not within the conventional framework of political debate, but largely through a reflection on the role that the future South Africa might achieve within world history. That is, she responds to the immediate political issues debated at the National Convention by assessing how they may enable South Africa to achieve “greatness” in world-historical context, by contributing something unique and distinctive to human history, as done before by Athens, Rome, Jerusalem or England—but the England of Elizabeth I and William Shakespeare (pp. 21-22).

**2. Politics and the changing limits of world-historical imagination:** This strategy of thought, which is made explicit in Schreiner’s argument, is often implicit in the thought of her contemporaries— and indeed in our own thought, although not always consciously. In thinking politically, we draw on a *necessarily limited* range of historical examples to imagine a possible future and this, in turn, places limits on what it’s possible for us to imagine. And the same historical examples came to be seen in a different light when viewed within a different understanding of world history. A hundred years ago, an idealized image of England provided the model of South Africa’s future to which Rhodes and many other colonists aspired, and to which Schreiner paid qualified homage. By the end of the nineteenth century, Britain had come to think of itself as the rightful successor to the Roman Empire, thus changing its image of itself and the image it projected.

**3. Pixley Seme on the future of Africa, seen from New York in 1906:** An example which shows how widespread was this image at that time can be taken from Pixley Seme’s “Regeneration of Africa,” written as a student at Columbia University in New York in 1906 (Seme became the driving force behind the formation of the ANC, and later its president): “Already I seem to see [Africa’s] chains dissolved, her desert plains red with harvest, her Abbysinia and her Zululand the seats of science and religion, reflecting the glory of the rising sun from her spires of their churches and universities. Her Congo and her Gambia whitened with commerce, her crowded cities sending forth the hum of business, and all her sons employed in advancing the victories of peace—greater and more abiding than the spoils of war” (*From Protest to Challenge*, p. 73; cf. week 5 of the course.)

**4. “A very real bond which unites all South Africans”:** Schreiner’s *Closer Union* is well known for its critique of racial domination, which became increasingly resonant in the decades ahead. But her argument against racial domination is based on an argument against large states committed to the pursuit of wealth (pp. 21-23) and in favour of human diversity, both as an insuperable feature of the time and a positive good (pp. 24-28). Schreiner’s vision of a South Africa as a polity united by its diversity was spelled out as early as 1891 “There is a subtle but a very real bond, which unites all South Africans, and differentiates us from all other peoples in the world. *This bond is our mixture of races itself*. It is this which divides South Africans from all other peoples in the world, and makes us one.”

**5. Schreiner’s Mediterraneanism:** This idea of this unity and diversity may have drawn on a contemporary political and aesthetic vision, associated with such figures as Goethe and Ruskin, which idealized the culture of the Mediterranean world. For Goethe, the Mediterranean was the “land where the lemon trees blossom, and a soft wind blows from the blue sky,” where the people were especially close to nature, “lovers of the open air, happy, hospitable, unreflective, their society simple and harmonious.” Schreiner never mentions the Mediterranean in *Closer Union*. But the Mediterranean cities she examines—Athens and Rome—are painted in a light derived from this aesthetic Mediterraneanism, as is her ideal for the unified South Africa. Schreiner herself travelled in Italy several times, and may have drawn her commitment to aesthetic simplicity from that experience. But the image of Mediterranean cultural diversity came mainly from the cities of the late Ottoman Empire—Istanbul, Smyrna, Salonica, Alexandria, etc— in which Muslims, Jews and Christians had lived together in relative harmony for many centuries. This history provides a source from which other South Africans have imagined a possible future beyond racial domination.

**6. Proposals for a new capital city:** Schreiner argues that the South African political order should accommodate and enable different forms of local community, aiming at inner harmony rather than external power. “All history teaches that in small states there tends, other things equal, to be more personal freedom, more individuality, and a higher social vitality than in large” (p. 2). Again: “Even the little city and territory of Athens, which might have been out into many a Karroo farm and lost there, was greater and is more immortal than the whole Persian Empire” (p. 22). Her proposal for a new capital city captures something of this vision. She imagines a city with no building more than two storeys high, white pillars forming colonnades around wide squares, “suitable to our land of unlimited spaces and wide skies,” Moorish courtyards and cloisters. The whole would represent “that simplicity and strength which has been the noblest characteristic of the South African people of the past.” (pp. 11-12). Another possible benefit of a new city would be the absence of an established history of racial separation.

**7. Critique of racial domination and/or racial exploitation:** The test of the nobility of South African character lies for Schreiner in its finding a solution to the “native question.” Concerning franchise rights, she held, “no distinction of race or colour should be made between South Africans” (p. 7). South Africa was uniquely equipped to respond to the breakdown of walls dividing continents; “everywhere European, Asiatic and African will interlard.” South Africa was brought face to face with this problem, and “on our power to solve it regally and heroically depends our greatness” (p. 26). She did not expect a non-racial franchise to challenge white political dominance in the short term. Her focus may have been as much on avoiding an outcome in which black people become “nothing but a vast engine of labour” (p. 29). That is, she rejected racial domination in large measure because she saw it as the basis for exploitation.