



Autobiography Bill Freund: An historian's passage to Africa

Bill Freund

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Review by Showers Mawowa

Published posthumously, this is a memoir of and by the doyen of African social and economic history, Professor Bill Freund. Described by fellow professor, friend and former colleague at the University of KwaZulu Natal, David Moore as "... the professor who wore the weight of history lightly" (Moore, 2020), by the time of his death in 2020, Bill had authored hundreds of books and academic articles and taught and supervised thousands of students, including myself.

His most famous work, *The Making of Contemporary Africa*, which was republished three times with significant revisions, remains a "bible" for many a student of African economic history (Freund, 1984). The memoir reflects on "*The Making of Bill Freund*" and his ideas and impressively a tribute to the people who made him and his ideas.

The book has 11 chapters that can be subdivided into three parts. The first three chapters sketch Bill's Austrian-Jewish ancestry prior to the First World War until the Holocaust. Chapters four to eight examine the world Bill was born into, one of Jewish immigrants in America, his adolescence and early love of history and Africa. The third section, chapters nine to 11, cover Bill's

experience and intellectual contribution to what became his home, Africa, and Durban specially.

Many of the book's takeaways are relevant to our contemporary world.

The book starts with the world of Bill's ancestors, Jews in early 1900s Vienna, Austria, who were never quite Austrian. When race is perceptibly an expression of the socio-economic divide, the national social contract is fragile. He effortlessly makes the point that this partly explains why some Austrians zealously cooperated with Nazis. The class and gender dimensions of this dark hour are well articulated, particularly the vulnerable situation for the poor Jews and women.

Bill's parents were among those who managed to escape and settle in America. The book shares a moving depiction of what "possibly" happened to some of his relatives who were not so fortunate – painful experiences that his family seldom spoke about. For a world currently witnessing horrific scenes in Ukraine and gripped with fear of another major world war, these chapters make for sober reading.

Chapters four onwards can be described as the autobiography proper, describing what life was like in Chicago for the Jewish immigrants, and the

young Bill. He makes sense of his parents' left leaning political values, critical attitudes towards Zionism and Jewish traditional identity and how this influenced his own thinking. In impressive detail he reflects on his adolescence, how he grappled with multiple identities, not least gender, nationality, race, class and ethnicity – and of course his parents' immediate Austrian past and status as immigrants. His mother, who was an academic, had the most influence on Bill's life and career.

Perennially among the brightest in class, Bill decided very early on to be a historian. Having been exposed to some of South Africa's anti-apartheid music and culture, by the end of high school Bill was fantasising about Africa. During his PhD at Yale, he found a calling in documenting the social history of Africa. It was this path, via Nigeria and Dar er Salaam, followed by another stint back in America, that finally saw him settle in Durban, the place that became his home until his death.

The final third of the book thus presents Bill's life in and reflections on South Africa, his home. Though he made friends in America, Bill never really found a home there, both intellectually and socially. The American



system rejected him and he in turn rejected it. In Durban he found a world of his choosing. He found joy in the “community” of place, people and ideas.

His fondest memories were of Nigeria, Tanzania and Durban where he immersed himself in local cultures and even learnt local languages. He maintained close relationships with people he met along the way. Family relations were important, but the academy was his life, so the many social relationships that Bill developed were in academic circles. The book excellently weaves together the many facets of Bill’s life.

The book provides detail about major intellectual influences on Bill. Eric Hobsbawm’s “independent Marxism” was most influential (Freund, *Autobiography Bill Freund: An historian’s passage to Africa*, 2021, p. 77), inspiring him to write “a history of Africa that was neither sentimental nor a patronising attempt to identify racialised victims nor a colonial apologia ... but a synthesis that integrated the economic, political and cultural at the centre of African history”.

Bill’s PhD was on early Dutch settlement in South Africa. Other influences include works on power elites by C. Wright Mills’s, Fred Cooper and Martin Legassick on Africa and South Africa respectively. He credits Van Onselen’s *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia* for inspiring his work on tin mining in Nigeria (Freund, 1981).

Bill’s story is a reminder that the academic path is not among the easiest or the most lucrative. The South African academy has been bleeding young bright black academics whose economic and family realities force them into the more financially rewarding job markets. Bill Freund could relate to this, and he was most supportive to young black academics. As the memoir shows, he faced similar pressures, but chose to follow his passion. It was not until the age of 40 that he got his first permanent job, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Bill makes a critical observation that many African students tend to research and write about the places they are from. This often leads to very original and interesting research, but teaches them little about the wider world. True, but there is an economic dimension to this and research funding incentives could address this.

The last chapter represents a “coming out” of sorts. Bill shares a candid assessment of South Africa’s social, political and economic trajectory since 1994. First, he laments the ANC’s failure to forge social cohesion across race and class. This is not only essential for the social project, but also for forging a developmental alliance between business, state and labour. Business takes some of the blame he argues.

Bill once believed it was the ANC that could bring about redistribution without ruining the country, avoiding another Zimbabwe. Over time, however, he grew skeptical.

There are some notable improvements – access to housing, electricity and water, the abolishment of capital punishment, sexual rights, media freedom and a progressive tax system among others – but overall, Bill became disillusioned, an idealist who ratified the idea of liberation but was horrified by corruption, levels of crime and lack of state capacity.

This leads me to my two final observations. Bill was critical of what he saw as simplistic invocation, if not instrumentalisation, of race. For him class, rather than race, was a more important way to view and analyse social relations. One gets the sense that as he aged, he became more open about this. The Cuban Revolution which never stressed race in isolation was a better model, he argued.

Lastly, Bill was a leftist pragmatist, but I wonder if this is something he grew into or was merely shaped by his historical materialism or both. He is unequivocal that modernisation has its place and so does capital.

One can conclude that Bill was not a believer of socialism utopia, for three reasons:

- Capitalism, despite recurrent crises, has through “competitive structuration” and its ability to invent new products, shown indomitable resilience. This Schumpeter calls “creative destruction” (Schumpeter, 1942) though Bill cautions that climate change might place a limit.
- Socialism, he argues, requires a strong and effective state.
- Thirdly, redistribution needs growth. He contends, “... without a road to accumulation, this country could go nowhere ...” (Freund, 2021, p. 148). He belabours the point, “Without economic growth, there is no possibility for equalisation, even of opportunity ...” (Ibid, 184). This a lesson derived from redistributive experiments in Zimbabwe, Tanzania and elsewhere.

But Bill was not attracted by American liberalism either, for the obvious reasons. The European social democracy model was a more realistic option for its growth with redistribution characteristics, but even this requires a capable and effective state presided over by developmental elites.

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