

Labour in Southern Africa

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REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

Labour in Southern Africa

Marc Epprecht

Jonathan Crush and Charles Ambler, eds., *Liquor and Labor in Southern Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press and Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press 1992).

Alan H. Jeeves and Jonathan Crush, eds., *White Farms, Black Labor: The State and Agrarian Change in Southern Africa, 1910-1950* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, London: James Currey, and Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press 1997).

SOUTH AFRICA'S TRUTH and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is meant to purge the evil of the apartheid era from the nation's body politic. In exchange for immunity from prosecution, police, medical doctors, government ministers, and anti-apartheid activists have so far all volunteered graphic testimony of torture, assassinations, destabilization of neighbouring countries, and other crimes against humanity. Perhaps not surprisingly, however, no one from the business community has volunteered to apologize for the enormous profits that were made from institutionalized racial segregation, profits that were taxed to finance apartheid structures and that were paid for in the ill-health and early death of African workers. As one critic noted, an estimated 68,000 men died in mine accidents alone since

Marc Epprecht, "Labour in Southern Africa," *Labour/Le Travail*, 41 (Spring 1998), 237-41.

the turn of the century, compared to 69 deaths in police custody during the apartheid years.¹

Labour historians have long described the horrendous conditions to which African men were exposed in South Africa's mines, the backbone of the industrial economy. Much of this scholarship challenges the liberal assertion that capital has been a force for good in a region bedeviled by pre-capitalist racial animosities. It shows that capital actively fanned such animosities and then profited from their institutionalization by successive demagogic regimes.

Two collections of essays by historians and historical geographers enrich this argument by focusing on struggles that took place in less visible sectors of the economy, nooks and crannies where African workers tended to be even more exploited and vulnerable than in the mines. *Liquor and Labor*, first, contains fifteen chapters covering much of the region, from the Zambian Copperbelt to the vineyards of the Cape to South Africa's giant urban centres. They range in time from 1658, when the Dutch governor at Cape Town recommended a daily glass of brandy to "animate" slaves toward Christianity, up to the 1980s, when giant corporations wiped out small-scale brewers with their mass-produced cartons of sorghum beer. The principal focus lies in the period from the turn of the 19th century to the early 1960s, when struggles to capture a cheap African labour force were most intense. The authors analyze both the changing ways that capital sought to use alcohol to capture and control its work force, and the protean ways that Africans resisted those controls.

The role of liquor in southern African society, and in particular its ability to crystallize early resistance to the state by African women, has been the theme of several important studies. The essays here build on these works and comparative studies from elsewhere — the introduction by Ambler and Jeeves has 180 footnotes. They also show how the startling diversity of policies toward alcohol can be linked to struggles between different groups of capitalists. Given the particular nature of coal mining in Natal, for example, mine owners tended to favour a system where their workers were "stabilized" by running up debts for drinking in company-owned canteens (Ruth Edgcombe). In Johannesburg, however, where mine owners found 15-20 per cent of their workers incapacitated by alcohol each day, there were early attempts to impose total prohibition (Julie Baker). At the Cape, poorer farmers clung to the ancient "tot system" (two quarts of reject wine per day in lieu of cash) long after more capitalized farmers sought to modernize (Pamela Scully). African drinking traditions also evolved over time reflecting class and generational conflict over who controlled mine workers' incomes (Patrick McAlister).

African women are prominent throughout the book, both as the main brewers of illicit liquor to male migrants, and as leaders of civil disturbances such as the

¹Ronald Suresh Roberts, "Call Big Business to account," *Mail and Guardian*, 4-10 July 1997, 3.

1929 mass protests against the "Durban system" (Helen Bradford). The latter was invented by the Durban municipal authorities in 1909 and subsequently emulated throughout the region. It contained African men in city-operated "cages" for drink, ensured that the beer was not strong enough to result in hangovers or excessive violence, and gave the city profits that subsidized the creation of racially segregated townships and amenities. Several of the chapters offer rich empirical evidence of African women's activism with regard to this face of the racist state. Phil Bonner, for example, gives a fascinating account of Basotho women's successful demolition of one town's attempt to fence male drinkers apart from female brewers. Such civil disturbances provided an early platform for the Communist Party to raise the connections between racism and capitalism.

Some African women were clearly empowered by the opportunities and profits that illicit brewing could bring — the shebeen queens enjoyed freedoms unheard of in traditional settings. Their establishments also helped give rise to vibrant urban cultures and, as Bonner notes, to a nascent political consciousness. None of the authors, however, romanticize alcohol. Its contribution to South Africa's present culture of anarchic and criminal violence is deservedly implicit in many of the chapters.

Noticeably missing from the collection is a chapter on Mozambique, where the Portuguese use of cheap wine to facilitate labour recruitment became notorious. A chapter on the corrosive social effects of urban drinking cultures in the so-called labour reserves like Lesotho would also have added to the book's otherwise commendable breadth.

The second book, *White Farms, Black Labor* takes our attention to the commercial farming sector. Again, fifteen chapters carry us across the region, this time from as far north as Malawi and Zimbabwe to as far south as the eastern Cape. The type of farms discussed include tobacco, maize, sugar, wool, and cotton. Each chapter has a concise, disciplined conclusion, one or two photographs, and at least one map. As with *Liquor and Labor*, *Farms* lacks a comprehensive bibliography but is well-served by the editors' introductory chapter.

The period covered (1910 to 1950) underscores the fact that brutal systems of racial segregation and exploitation long predated the introduction of apartheid in 1948. Through detailed case studies, the authors emphasize the diversity and unpredictability of agricultural change rather than its conformity to set historical laws. Indeed, they show how different systems of labour exploitation and production co-existed within the region and even within farms, how highly localized environmental and political factors affected the process of modernization, and how unreliable so-called progressive forces could be in practice.

One consistent theme of the various chapters is that pre-industrial forms of agricultural practice may have been exploitative and violent but they did give Africans room to negotiate for tolerable working conditions. These practices began to be replaced by more modern relations of production in the post-World War I era.

Labour tenancy was phased out and migrant labour compounds modelled on the mines were phased in. Fully proletarianized farm workers were then exposed to ever harsher working and living conditions. At the heart of South Africa's most productive maize-growing area in the 1940s, to illustrate, Martin Murray cites a labour inspector who found that 75 per cent of all workers bore scars from beatings at work. Charles Mather shows how "progressive" farmers reduced costs by paying wages but deducting spurious fines. Hostels in Natal are directly implicated in the malaria epidemics of the late 1920s (Alan Jeeves). In 1928-29, for example, an estimated 3,000 African workers died of malaria on the sugar plantations (William Beinart).

Throughout the region, white farmers called upon the state to use its coercive powers to ensure the flow of Africans to the farms. Interestingly, both pre-apartheid South Africa and the various colonial states proved to be reluctant allies, tending to criticize farmers for not doing enough by way of positive incentives. Nonetheless, time and again states gave the most inefficient and retrograde farmers enormous financial support in order to shore up votes. Natal's notoriously secessionist "sugarocracy," for example, was appeased with higher protectionist tariffs than any other commodity. So protected, the region's commercial white farmers had little incentive either to improve working conditions or to avoid environmentally damaging practices.

Women as farm labourers are seriously under-represented in these essays. Gender, however, is discussed in interesting ways. Robert Morrell charts a link between the nature of paternalism in the Natal and the education of white boys. Charles van Onselen argues that paternalism inhibited "the onset of psychic manhood in blacks" and so drained them of their capacity to resist. Shirley Brooks examines how class differences between white men in Zululand and Natal affected their attitudes toward conservation — settlers on marginal lands highly resented, and struggled against, the hunting/conservationist ethos of Natal's aristocracy.

Together these two books raise compelling questions. The history is a timely caution against optimism about the relationship between capitalism and racism. In southern Africa, "progress" has meant hugely increased production to be sure. But it has also meant environmental destruction, high commodity prices, and systematic racial violence and injustice. In light of this history, the invisibility of the business community at the TRC is truly remarkable. So too is how trusting former opposition movements seem to be that the community will be the vanguard of future development and prosperity in the region. Mozambique, formerly socialist and formerly at the frontline of the struggle against apartheid, has just opened its borders to an influx of white South African commercial farmers — recolonization in the eyes of many.

As for the historians themselves, it must be pointed out that they are not very representative of the population of the region. *Liquor and Labor* does not have a single contribution by a black scholar, *Farms* has one; *Liquor and Labor* has five

female contributors, *Farms* has one. White male domination, in other words, does not appear to be confined to the capitalist farming sector!

Now, I certainly do not subscribe to dogmatic identity politics. But I do miss the voice of members of historically disadvantaged groups in works that are focused on those groups. Addressing this *manque*, rather than the inequity of capitalism as a whole, may be a worthy short-term goal to bear in mind for future producers of left-leaning scholarship.

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ARTICLES OF INTEREST: Marx, Fanon, Nkrumah, and the Intersection of Socialism and Radical Feminism, *Kenneth Long* • Marxist Theory and Marxism as a Mass Ideology: The Effects of the Collapse of 'Really Existing Socialism' to West-European Marxism, *John Milios* • Throwing a Dishcloth into the Works: Troubling Theories of Domestic Labor, *Jenny Cameron* Art, Economy, and the Differentiation of Value, *Roby Rajan*

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