

Colin Murray, *Families Divided. The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho*, Ravan Press, 1981, 219 pp.

This special book is an extensive and generalising work which gives, in my view, a well-grounded account of the systematic impoverishment of Lesotho from the early period of its granary economy up to the late 1970s - the period of the labour reserve.

The author conveniently distinguishes two overlapping phases in the historic incorporation of Basotho as wage labourers: the first, lasting for about one hundred years (1870-1970) is described as one of readily available employment for Basotho who needed it and of rapid albeit uneven industrial expansion in the core areas of South Africa, initially in mining and farming and latterly in manufacturing - where wages were poor and conditions of residence controlled by the notorious pass laws (p.22). The second phase characterised by the process of alienation of labour through the manipulation of political boundaries (1963), the internalisation policy and the fulfilment of the Bantustan policy in respect of several 'homelands', is of particular concern because of what Murray terms the 'repercussions' and 'relative alienation' of Basotho labour. The conclusion of his analysis is that the structure of apartheid in the late 1970s and the early 1980s is directed towards the alienation of black labour.

Murray presents empirical evidence to substantiate the 'economic transformation' of Lesotho and its impact on the lives of migrants and their families. His material is mainly drawn from a period of two years (1972-74) anthropological fieldwork in five villages and from a further brief visit in 1978. The way the book is written reflects, in the words of the author, two convictions in particular:

One is that no aspect of contemporary village life (in Lesotho) can be understood without central reference to the dependence of villagers for their livelihood on earnings derived from the export of labour. The other is that this dependence must be understood in its proper historical perspective (p. xi).

The opening chapters outline the historical background to Lesotho's current economic predicament and challenge the well-established tradition in South African economic historiography which attempts to explain poverty in the 'labour reserves' by invoking African failure to respond to changing conditions and, specifically, features intrinsic to African structure which inhibit the capacity to innovate.

The key question is posed: "How have the Basotho become poor?" To this end, an historical account is given of the long conflict with the Boers over land and the resultant resolution that determined the present political boundaries of Lesotho. A series of economic and legislative developments are outlined: discoveries of diamonds in 1867 in the arid waste of the Northern Cape Colony and of gold in the Witwatersrand in 1866, discriminatory legislation such as the Land Act of 1913 and agrarian pressures from the Boers forcing authorities to introduce protective grain tariffs against imports from Basutoland especially by the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. These factors, the author argues, led rapidly and irreversibly to the incorporation of the Basotho into a larger economic system.

By 1899 Basutoland had, as a consequence, an industry of great economic value to South Africa, namely, native labour. It supplied the sinews of agriculture in the Orange Free State, it kept going railway works, coal and diamond mines at Jagersfontein and Kimberly, the gold mines of the Transvaal and furnished, in addition a large amount of domestic services in the surrounding territories. All of this was considered quite acceptable within the political dictum of the dominant class in the labour receiving country, notably that:

The native should only be allowed to enter the urban areas, which are essentially the white man's creation, when he is willing so to enter and to minister to the needs of the white man and should depart therefrom when he ceases so to minister.

It needs hardly to be said that this is the classical problem of underdevelopment, one that has concrete intent based largely on surplus appropriation and expropriation. Note that until this time (1899), migration for Basothos was discretionary rather than necessary. Production and export of grain was the most important source of income. Indeed before 1900 the movement that was taking place beyond the Basotho frontiers produced "no other effect than to increase the export of wheat and other cereals to a most remarkable degree". The valleys of Basutoland, composed as they were of a deep layer of vegetable mould, watered by numerous streams, and favoured with regular rains in the good season, required little more than a modicum of work to cover themselves with the richest crops. (CB319). One is given to understand that nowhere else in South Africa was there a more naturally industrious nation than Basotho. Even the colonial revenue must have benefitted very considerably by the Basotho trade.

It is against this background of impoverishment and underdevelopment that the author examines the impact of oscillating migration on the social structure and, of course, the shift from discretionary to necessary character of migration. This Murray points out, is corroborated by the substantial increase in the number of labour passes issued during the first decade of the century which reflected a steadily declining per capita income from Basotho agriculture. That decline is invidiously linked to, *inter alia*, the establishment of the railway from Cape to Kimberly which modified the economic situation of Basutoland because the latter produced less and found no outlets for its products. Secondly, the export market for grain from Basutoland was adversely affected by a prohibition on imports by the Transvaal and by competition from American and Australian grain, which could be cheaply transported by the newly constructed railway from Cape to Kimberly. Thirdly, the discriminatory Land Act of 1913 is portrayed as having deprived Africans of the capacity to compete where, initially at least, they were more successful than white farmers because of their lower opportunity cost of engaging in commercial agriculture. For Basutoland, the Act had, as the author himself points out, two adverse consequences: first, some "squatters" and sharecroppers who were forced off land in the Orange Free State migrated to Basutoland, exacerbating the population pressure there. Secondly, there was the depression of agricultural wages. According to Murray the Land Act was for farmers what the maximum - permissible - average agreement was for the mining magnates.

What then, is the impact of oscillating migration on the lives of migrants and their families? To this end, there is a chapter on family case studies that are marshalled to illustrate individual labour histories and family adaptation. This section is the most copiously researched and empirically oriented. The notion of the family structure advanced encapsulates diverse temporal processes - dissolution/ conservation contradictions - in which fieldwork evidence is used to show that processes of 'dissolution' and 'conservation' are simultaneously at work in rural communities and that both processes are rooted in the political economy of the labour reserve. (p. 108).

A special chapter is devoted to an analysis of the increasing dependence on migrant labour which tends to exacerbate rather than inhibit the process of differentiation. Explanations of inequalities are on the basis of dependency ratio (ratio of dependents to paid employee). Furthermore, differentiation is analysed with reference to the developmental cycle of the rural household and to contradictory forces of capitalist accumulation as they apply to the labour reserve. Against this background, the growing differentiation, poverty, relative alienations and class formation are considered.

Last, but not least, is the author's description of the population of Lesotho as it appears today, notably, as a "rural proletariat scratching about on the land". Here we are exposed to the manifold politico-economic problems, viz: an agricultural system that provides minimal security to households without regular access to cash earnings; ploughing and fertilizer charges that are too high - both items being more or less directly related to the price of oil and to inflation which strikes at the heart of agricultural operations and peasant production. The author refers to this debilitating process as the full effects of the international crisis of capital, a crisis that has exacerbated rather than inhibit the process of differentiation, poverty, and class formation.

The thrust of my review is a few critical comments regarding the contextual structure of Murray's work. Firstly, there is the tendency to fragmentise certain chapters (e.g. on family case studies) with the result that thematic and sequential integration is less evident and somewhat obscure. Secondly, the author constructs his own 'distinctive' viewpoint of 'divided families' but this, in the reviewer's opinion, is not presented in the form of an explicit and internally consistent 'theory'. Thirdly, there is more information presented on economic history, less on the politics of Lesotho both during the colonial and postcolonial era. In fact the term 'labour reserve' is inadequate and contestable as a theoretical concept - for it does not do justice to the social and political aspirations of the Basotho as active agents of change in their own country.

Perhaps most important, is the theoretical attempt at recapturing "Lesotho's problematique" in the closing lines of the book, i.e., whether the Basotho can develop a full historical consciousness of the structural processes which gave rise to the 'labour reserve' and whether they can transcend the social and political disabilities and divisions which are explicit in the strategy of ethnic balkanisation and implicit in the grand apartheid strategy of 'constellation of Southern African States'. It is here that the author marginally - and in passing - seems to imply that Lesotho's opportunities for emergence from semi-peripheral status to a central role in the independent Southern African economy are very much greater with the successful conclusion of the political struggle in South Africa. In this last chapter, the contribution appears to lie more in raising these important issues than in answering them.

Overall, this book is rich in fresh empirical information, much of which has not been published before. Its organisational layout is fairly ethnological by major periods of Lesotho's economic history. The analysis is well-supported by a strong data base - diagrams and biographies - based on extensive interviews with families left behind. These are illustrative vignettes and case materials that portray 'survival strategies' of individual migrant families. The author's surveys of theories of labour migration in Southern Africa and his critical reflection on current debates make a significant contribution to re-theorising questions of oscillating migration especially in relation to the dynamics of continuity and change in the social and family system, kinship structures and marriage patterns.

Perhaps the obvious drawback is that this piece of research is rather evidently a revision of a Ph.D thesis. The ponderous academic language and formal convoluted phraseology are too reminiscent of the doctoral struggle and suggest that further revision is warranted.

Nonetheless, the book is strongly recommended to anyone interested in getting a village-eye view of some very basic social and economic processes at work in a changing supplier state. Whatever the debate it may provoke among specialists, it has enriched the way in which we look at the impact of migrant labour on families in Lesotho.

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