

## REVIEW OF :

Alf Stadler (1987) - *The Political Economy of Modern South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip; London: Croom Helm.

*Heather Hughes*

What is immediately impressive about Stadler's book is the enormous amount of information he is able to bring within a single, clearly defined frame of reference without swamping a reader (only 76 footnotes in toto, for example). His central contention is that

while the efforts the state made to reform the political order during the 1970s were very significant in dictating some of the outcomes of the great transformation which South Africa is undergoing, they were part of a defensive strategy designed to avert fundamental change, by a process of incremental modifications to the status quo, and were not its leading edge (p 4-5).

His historical approach illuminates the point that past 'reforms' to the status quo (the jargon of previous phases of reorganisation was of course quite different) have been no more than defensive strategies either, aiming as they have done to reinforce racial domination and control over the black majority, deprived of common political rights. He traces the emergence of a domestically-located and politically powerful bourgeoisie, 'the really significant feature of the South African political economy' (p 22), first in the mining industry and then later in manufacturing and agriculture. The strong influence of this owning class, coupled with the particular labour needs of industry, meant the evolution of a highly coercive labour policy. And since 'the question of admitting the majority of adult men and, later, women to the franchise ... has only ever arisen anywhere ... in the context of industrialisation' (p 36), he explains the manifold attempts by successive white parties in government to repress the political aspirations of the majority. As he observes, controls over the movement of labour

were singly the most serious issue in the relations between governments and their black subjects, providing from before the First World War down to the 1980s some of the most intense confrontations (including the one at Sharpeville) in their political relations (p 86).

Drawing on the work of Doug Hindson, Stadler points not only to the racial divisions explicit in these labour controls, but also to the growing divisions within the African working class, principally between 'insiders',

entitled to remain in the cities, and 'outsiders', vulnerable to extrusion from them. The former have taken a leading role in struggles against the state, particularly in recent decades (and Stadler is correct to emphasise the dominance of the town over the countryside, even though he tends to equate the latter with the bantustans). It is a division which, he suggests, deeply affected the emergence of the independent trade union movement in the 1970s:

The strongest support for the new unions came from migrant workers, rather than workers permanently settled in the urban areas and enjoying Section 10 rights, who were the most privileged groups among blacks in the workforce (p 174).

(A small, but important, note must be entered here about Stadler's use of the terms 'black' and 'African'. He tends to employ them interchangeably; has the state won this ideological battle?)

It will be clear to anyone following the long 'politics and economy' debate since the 1970s that Stadler places himself firmly in the tradition of analysts who have stressed 'the extent to which apartheid and exploitation of black labour were interlocked' (p 15). (His use of the past tense, while he points out is 'hopeful', is often disconcerting.) As such, it is a useful, general summary of this position. But Stadler not only sums up; it seems as if he is arguing for an extension of the use of the central term 'political economy'. His analysis is correct in demonstrating what he, following Yudelman, terms the 'symbiotic relationship' between political and economic spheres in South Africa, but is it helpful to run the two together on that basis? The institutional and functional separation of 'politics' and 'economics' has been a characteristic of capitalist societies, here as anywhere else, and it is often difficult to work out from Stadler where the one ends and the other begins. One must assume a clear intention on his part, which has led him, *inter alia*, to portray the relationship between the owners of industry and the holders of state power as basically in tune, and to see apartheid as more or less a logical development of segregation. To stress an essential continuity of institutions and practices of control and repression is to underplay key shifts and conflicts, notably perhaps in the radical social engineering of the apartheid period.

The argument for a physically-present 'political economy' requires some conceptual discussion. In its absence, however, this is still one of the best overviews of contemporary South Africa available.