

Bozzoli, B (ed) CLASS, COMMUNITY AND CONFLICT
(Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987)

Since it was first established in 1978, History Workshop has gained increasing respect as being the foremost conference held in South Africa where scholars can meet and present new work on South African history. Such work is, broadly speaking, based around theories of historical materialism and intent upon looking at historical structure and process from the bottom upwards: 'to uncover the history of the person in the street, of whatever race, gender, creed or origin, and offer new historical explanations', as Bozzoli writes in the preface to the volume under review. (p xvii) Self-consciously eschewing any large scale generalizations on state, capital or even class formation, this approach is taken to its logical extension through a desire not to take institutions or organizations which claim influence amongst the dominated at face value. As Bozzoli writes, 'it has been the strength of History Workshop to have attempted to develop a grassroots focus which enriches our understanding of (such) institutions themselves' (p 3). As a result of these perspectives it is acknowledged that 'it is not always certain' that work presented at History Workshop 'has definite strategic lessons for activists' (p xviii).

If evidence still need be found this volume can attest to the richness and vitality of recent South African social history. The articles contained in this volume are mainly derived from papers presented to the 1983 History Workshop which had as the central theme the question of class, community and conflict. The contributions are introduced by two articles which essentially provide a broader understanding of the general perspectives of History Workshop. The first, by Bozzoli, aims both to contextualize the studies which follow and provide an analysis of the manner in which various historical and theoretical issues central to contemporary South African historiography can be tackled. As such Bozzoli's article encapsulates what has become generalized, in an often problematic fashion, as the History Workshop approach. Callinicos then provides a valuable and in many ways complementary piece dealing with the issue of how historically rigorous analyses of oppressed and exploited people can relate to the lived experiences and needs of such people and assist in transforming consciousness.

Thereafter there are sixteen articles which present micro-studies of various issues under the broad theme. Six focus on the manner in which people recall their own history and how such recollection can be interpreted. Of note here would be Peires' account of how people dispossessed of land in the Kat River view the career of a major adversary, the lawyer and parliamentarian Fenner-Solomon. Of three articles which focus on factory floor issues, Brink's analysis of Afrikaans-speaking women garment workers during the 1920s is fascinating and part of a welcome trend towards writing the social history of White workers. Various other essays cover aspects of South Africa's history during the first three

decades of the twentieth century ranging from studies of Jewish community and political affiliation, white alluvial diamond diggers, the Independent Labour Party, and a valuable essay by Bradford on political activity amongst African women in rural Natal during 1929. Two essays consider urban African township communities.

The nuances and complexities of the analyses presented do not easily admit to wide generalization. In this sense Bozzoli is correct when pointing to the lack of rich historical detail and the over-schematising clearly evident in more structural left wing accounts of South African history and the problems which confront those too eager to gain quick political lessons from social history. However, this collection is based around a particular way of looking at the nature of South African society. As Bozzoli writes:

The backdrop to all these papers are the large scale processes of capital accumulation and class formation ... the gigantic movements of people and capital which occur when peasants are dispossessed, land becomes consolidated in the hands of fewer and fewer people, cities are formed around labour-exploiting industries, and state need to protect the interests of the wealthy from the poor (p 14).

Herein lies a major problem. While the so-called History Workshop approach is continually insisting that its work is 'merely' contributing to 'the opening up of a vast field of social enquiry' rather than with making 'conclusive statements' (p 3), it actually seems to aim at detailing a social 'tapestry' that often has an unclear or even contradictory relationship to broader work of South African political economy. These issues perhaps can be considered with autonomy within the historiography of countries that possess a stronger historical materialist tradition than South Africa, but they still do require a level of conceptual analysis that relates to the implications of particular historical approaches. It is insufficient to make claims on behalf of recent South African social history merely by pointing to the inadequacies of earlier structuralism. The task of developing a social history of South African society that claims to be informed by historical materialism has its own inherent problems which must be fully considered. It is thus no use stating that further micro-studies need to be accomplished before meaningful generalizations can be made. If South African social history is claiming to be more than well detailed, often precious, micro-studies, then it is necessary fully to confront the issues of structure and agency and state and capital. As all involved in History Workshop well know, the benefits of oral history so amply demonstrated in this text cannot have as their sole objective the study of subjected people: what will be the implications of a social history of the Chamber of Mines or the Native Affairs Department under Verwoerd and Eiselen?

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