

A REVIEW ARTICLE:

William Beinart, Peter Delius and Stanley Trapido (eds.), *Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa 1850-1930* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986)

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The theoretical significance of *Putting a Plough to the Ground* must be evaluated in terms of a very substantial introduction, organized around a periodization of the literature on rural South Africa. This periodization moves from a warm and appreciative appraisal of the historian WH Macmillan, with his 'welfarist concern' and his focus on impoverishment (first white, then black), through a vivid recreation of the dark picture - compared to the progress of agriculture in other settler societies - by CW de Kiewiet, a cool and distant comment on the modernization school of Hobart Houghton and his contemporaries in the 1950s and 1960s, and on to an account of the revisionist project of the 1970s. There is an element of what is almost rancour in the reaction to the work of the revisionists, and it is essentially as a response to the shortcomings of the radical analysis of the 1970s that the work in this book is being defined. Criticisms of revisionist work (and of Mike Morris in particular) recur through the rest of the introductory piece. There is a persistent return (both explicitly and implicitly) to what are regarded as the unacceptably crude formulations of the unhelpfully broad generalizations of revisionism. Thus, in delineating the themes of Delius' essay on Abel Erasmus, which attempts an exploration of 'the history of the eastern Transvaal before 1900 through the prism of an individual life' (p 23), the editors' concern is not only to draw attention to what the trajectory of this life reveals about the specificity of the form of the local state in the Transvaal after 1870, but to point up the lack of subtlety in previous analyses. 'Morris' suggestion that the State was based on a feudal parcellization of power conveys a sense of the extent of devolution but it fails either to capture the particularity of the SAR or to grasp the extent to which the state was restructured in the decades after 1870' (p 24). Again, in pointing to the key role of prominent figures in bringing about agrarian transformation revealed in the work of Trapido, Beinart, Keegan, Morrell and Shillington, the editors focus critically on how these new insights challenge 'the idea that agrarian transformation was in the hands of a class of semi-feudal Boer land-owners who became capitalist farmers' (p 29).

What is being asserted is need for work (such as that contained in this volume) which refines upon earlier conceptualizations, through revealing the fine grain, the intricate pattern of social reality. 'The view from below' provides a sense of the infinite variety and complexity of social experience. Moreover, 'it has also helped free the rethinking of key concepts' (p 17). The introduction claims that 'A number of contributions to this collection make the point explicitly or implicitly that capitalism needs to be much more fully clothed conceptually and suggests some elements of the appropriate conceptual dress' (p 17).

However, the thumbnail sketches of the essays and the generalized account of the themes in the introduction in no way suggest what these additional conceptualizations might consist of. In fact, the impression given in the introductory overview is of an unwillingness to conceptualize or even to generalize too extensively for fear of betraying the veracity of history from below and falsifying the minutiae of social experience so painstakingly uncovered. One is left with a sense of seemingly endless qualification and reservation. If the editors, apparently entrapped in a web of empirical modifications, are unable to draw out precisely the nature of their conceptual advances, then perhaps these are to be found embedded in the various pieces which make up the volume. Some of the contributions will now be considered, bearing in mind the claim that a greater theoretical sophistication has been achieved.

In the opening pages of his piece 'Settler Accumulation in East Griqualand', Beinart returns to the preoccupations of the Introduction, firmly placing his analysis as an instance of the most recent tradition in rural historiography. In the story of white settlement in East Griqualand as told in settler reminiscences, the achievement of white domination seems 'unproblematic and inevitable', (p 261) but Beinart draws our attention to 'recent advances in the writing of agrarian history [which] offer a framework for a rather different analysis' (p 262). White domination was not simply a question of natural superiority, but was achieved through conquest and struggle, through the exercise of coercive power and the ability to call upon state support (though the settler position vis-a-vis the colonial state was not, as Beinart makes clear, simple and straightforward). What the history of the region under scrutiny reveals is that simple assumptions, not only about the pattern of white domination, but about the very fact of this domination may be hopelessly inaccurate. In the Umzimkulu district, the settlers, 'were deeply constrained in the controls which they could exercise by the struggles of African communities' (p 262). And, furthermore, Africans succeeded through a process of recomunalization not only in regaining control of some private land, but in reinforcing and securing this control once segregation was enforced. This represented what must be seen as a defeat for the settler community, 'although it could certainly be accommodated in

the broader patterns of dominance that characterized the country as a whole in the twentieth century' (p 262). Beinart goes on to say that 'the new agrarian historiography must be able to allow for such variations and byways in these outer reaches of white settlement' (p 262).

There are several things that need to be noted about all this. First, it would appear that Beinart is no longer at this point setting the 'new agrarian historiography' so sharply against the inadequacies, the crudities of revisionist work, as was the case in the introduction to the volume. What the new agrarian historiography does in this account is first of all to expose the strongly ideological cast of historical accounts based on settler reminiscences, and secondly, to reveal the importance of taking into consideration those distinctive regional variations which not only differ from, but in some cases (like this one), contradict the general rule. This insistence on allowing for variations might be taken as pointing to the regional insensitivity of the over-arching analyses produced by the revisionists, but the criticism is implicit, muted; the claim to a 'rethinking of key concepts' made in the Introduction is absent here. In sum, the theoretical project of the new agrarian historiography seems far less forcefully and ambitiously formulated in this piece.

Beinart's study is a marvellously detailed story of the events and conflicts, of the processes at work, in one region and at one period. There were relatively few poor whites in East Griqualand, where the pattern of land ownership tended towards concentration, and most settlers shared the world view and values 'of the dominant English-speaking colonial culture' (p 269). But there was a degree of differentiation in the settler community, and sometimes the interests of different groups conflicted strongly, or significant shifts occurred in the political balance of forces. All this is vividly evoked. However, what we do not have is an intimate sense of the 'struggles of African communities' (p 262) which moulded so importantly the final dispensation regarding land in the area. There is a contrast here with the essay by Trapido, 'Putting a Plough to the Ground', which charts very graphically the fortunes of some of the families who came to be croppers on the Vereeniging Estates. Trapido has had access to a different spectrum of source material from Beinart - interview material as well as documentation of African experiences. What aspects of the social fabric the agrarian historian can reveal, will depend on the kind of information which is there to be exploited. It is not only the revisionist expositions of history from above which have been shaped by the information that was used, or that was available. The parameters of studies cast in the new mould of agrarian historiography are likewise determined. What Ross is concerned to elucidate in his piece 'Origins of Capitalist Agriculture in the Cape' is the much earlier genesis and spread of capitalist relations in the settler dominated areas of South Africa than was commonly assumed. Juxtaposing his view to the picture drawn by Morris of

capitalist mining being introduced 'into an environment which apart from the ports of Cape Town and Durban, was predominantly feudal and subsistence oriented' (p 57), Ross suggests that a high proportion of the population 'lived within a capitalist environment' (p 57) before 1870. A second theme which Ross follows through is the origin and subsequent replication throughout South Africa of the settler farm as the mode of capitalist exploitation - a mode which is often mistakenly taken 'as a given, as a natural form of colonial exploitation' (p 58).

The editors express some reservations about Ross' unequivocal view that relations in settler dominated areas were 'unmistakenly capitalist' (p 56) in nature at such an early date, finding such a position to be an overstatement of the case. They concede, however, that what is conveyed in Ross' work is 'the reality of a well advanced process of capital accumulation and dispossession, of the enforcement of private land rights and of systems of coerced and wage labour ...' (p 21). Why they baulk so unhappily at regarding all this as 'fully capitalist relationships' is not at all clear, and seems to reflect their unfortunate penchant for endless qualification.

In illustrating those features of Cape society which stamped it as 'unmistakably capitalist', Ross refers to the significant differentiation amongst the settler population, many of whom were not and never could become independent landowners. There was evidence of white poverty as early as 1732 when an occupational census designated 15 percent of the colony's free burghers as 'poor, indigent or decrepit' (p 71). It is interesting to set this finding in the context of the arguments in the piece by Bundy ('Vagabond Hollanders and Runaway Englishmen') which follows immediately after Ross' study in the volume. Bundy sets out to explain and correct the commonly accepted notion that poor whiteness first became an obvious phenomenon in South Africa in the 1890s. He suggests that there were significant numbers of poor and proletarianized whites in the Cape over the three decades before 1890, but that this group only became socially visible with ideological shifts which were both local and metropolitan, and in terms of which white poverty was defined as a social problem for the first time. Ross' work supports Bundy's challenge to the 'broadly established "fact" of South African history that poor whites first appeared in substantial numbers in the 1890s', (p 103) but also points to the existence of white poverty at a far earlier date than even Bundy suggests.

What emerges also from a reading of these two pieces in conjunction with one another, is the significance of shifts in metropolitan ideology or policy in shaping and influencing local attitudes or conditions. Ross notes that the legislation eliminating the legal disabilities of slaves and Khoi emanated from the heart of the Empire, impinging on colonial society from the outside. As a result 'the translation into South African conditions' of these legal changes 'was bound to be problematic' (p 80). Ross documents

how control over labour was reasserted in a different form in the period immediately after emancipation. Bundy shows how attitudes to poverty in colonial society were influenced and moulded by the realignment of British attitudes.

The book offers many new insights into the economic, social and ideological forces which have shaped the South African countryside. It has been impossible in the scope of this review to pinpoint more than a very few of these. What the work of these historians has indicated is that the view from below is crucial to a full understanding of the rural past. It not only challenges and refutes many of the accepted orthodoxies and older formulations. It shows how many of the broader social processes already identified were played out in local contexts. However, the claims made in the Introduction to a rethinking of key concepts are unfounded. It would be rather too harsh to apply to the work in this volume the criticism levelled by the editors at earlier Afrikaner writers - 'only too often the empirical richness of their work was matched by its conceptual poverty' (p 9) - because these studies are not theoretically uninformed. The new agrarian historiography is a reaction to revisionist perspectives - but it also draws many of its central preoccupations from that work (the editors note, for example, that Morris and others 'placed class struggle firmly on the agenda for research') (p 15). Nevertheless, the advances made have been in the way of extensions to empirical knowledge rather than theoretical refinement. Even here, for instance in reaffirming the centrality of labour tenancy, the revisionist literature is not significantly challenged.