

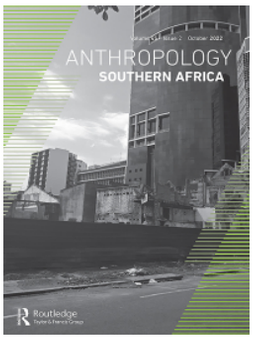
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Articulations of kinship and capital in Southern African anthropology: revisiting Wolpe and his critics

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In the 1970s and 1980s, the anthropology of Southern Africa produced rich concepts and debates on the relationship between kin-based domestic groups in rural peripheries and the core dynamics of capitalist development. These issues were later sidelined by the culturalist turn away from systematic social analysis. Here I revisit (a) Harold Wolpe's seminal 1972 piece on the articulation of capitalist and precapitalist modes of production, and (b) contemporaneous anthropological critics who insisted on a more granular and diachronous understanding of articulations of capitalist and domestic-group dynamics. Those debates have continuing relevance for understanding articulations of capitalist social forms such as wages and labour-power with the dynamics of household and kinship. I approach those articulations by attending to questions of time at various scales, with a focus on the structuring mediations of the wage as a capitalist social form.

Nas décadas de 1970 e 1980, a antropologia da África Austral produziu conceitos e debates ricos sobre a relação entre grupos domésticos baseados em parentesco nas periferias rurais e a dinâmica central do desenvolvimento capitalista. Essas questões foram posteriormente marginalizadas pelo enfoque culturalista que se afastou da análise social sistemática. Neste artigo, revisito (a) o texto seminal de Harold Wolpe, de 1972, sobre a articulação dos modos de produção capitalista e pré-capitalista, e (b) os críticos antropológicos contemporâneos que insistiram numa compreensão mais granular e diacrónica das articulações das dinâmicas capitalistas e dos grupos domésticos. Esses debates continuam a ser relevantes para compreender as articulações das formas sociais capitalistas, tais como salários e força de trabalho, com a dinâmica do agregado familiar e do parentesco. Abordo essas articulações prestando atenção a questões de tempo em várias escalas, com foco nas mediações estruturantes do salário como forma social capitalista.

Keywords: capitalism, social reproduction

It has been more than fifty years since Harold Wolpe (1972) published "Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid," in the first volume of *Economy and Society*. Cited more than two thousand times since, it is arguably the most consequential among a series of theoretical interventions around that time that marked the arrival of structural Marxism in Southern African studies. Through the 1970s and 1980s, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power" left its imprint on discussions about the history, politics and social life of the subcontinent. Via Neville Alexander's work (1979) on racial capitalism, it also found its way into global discourses that have since returned to prominence (Hall 1980; Hart 2007; Levenson and Paret 2023; 2024; Robinson 1983). It was an early example of what the Comaroffs have called "theory from the South" (2012).

In Southern African studies, however, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power" took a backseat around the turn of the twenty-first century, as new culturalisms eclipsed Marxism and interest waned in analyses of large-scale social structures such as capitalism.[1] More recently that interest has returned and it is in light of that renewal that I revisit Wolpe's claims here, along with contemporaneous anthropological responses to them. I do not address his role in undergirding

work on articulations of capitalism and racism—I have done that elsewhere (White 2020). Instead, I focus only on his thesis that twentieth-century Southern African society was structured by the uneven articulation of two modes of production: capitalist and precapitalist. There was analytical power in this, but also limitation; that was evident already at the time. The model met with mixed reception among anthropologists, including those who regarded their work as Marxist in inspiration. They recognised that it broke through liberal dualisms that miscontrasted supposedly traditional forms of rural life with the modernity of the regional economy and its urban-industrial core. But they found it too ungranular to help think through the topics of that period in ethnographies of Southern African rural peripheries, most notably local social differentiation and the developmental cycles of African households reliant on migrant labour.

Instead of taking sides in those debates of half a century ago, I revisit them to argue for a synthesis that also has explanatory power in the present. I do so with an emphasis on time. Anthropological critics of the structural Marxist model were mainly worried about its emphasis on the articulation of two synchronically comprehended systems (Spiegel 1981; 1983). By contrast, ethnographies of migrant labour and rural households were strongly diachronic. Taking inspiration from this, I propose using diachrony to reground Wolpe's focus on the articulation of capitalism and domestic life. At least five scales or channels of time are relevant. One is how to understand the existence in Southern Africa of countrysides where apparently precapitalist African agrarian production continued into the twentieth century. A second is the organisation of time Wolpe sought to address: the suspension inside a capitalist society of what appears to be a preceding mode of production. A third is the developmental cycle of households dependent on migrant labour, as studied ethnographically. A fourth is the varying relationship of domestic production and reproduction to capital over historical time. A fifth is the temporally complex composition of household membership, including the dispersal of dependants and the sustenance of relations with deceased relatives. A critically sympathetic review of "Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power," alongside contemporaneous ethnographic responses, puts our attention onto relations of rural African domestic life with capital over a range of temporal scales. Implicated in all of these is the social form of the wage, itself the main concern of Wolpe's argument.

Dualism and its critics

Southern Africa has notoriously been claimed to contain two tensely juxtaposed sociocultural orders. Sometimes the contrast is presented as being of tradition with modernity, sometimes of African with Western, sometimes third world with first world, sometimes the indigenous and the colonising. Throughout these variations there is nonetheless broad consensus about the duality of the region's sociocultural forms.

In its classically colonial articulation, this dualism juxtaposed a rising Western modernity with a surviving world of African tradition (Spiegel and Boonzaier 1988). The former expressed itself in cities and their industries and in those sectors of regional agriculture controlled by settler interests; the latter in countrysides where African ways were still—note the temporal mode—at least partially intact, if fragile, and focused on subsistence agriculture. In Houghton's influential version of this idea, African migrant labourers were links between these spaces but therefore "men of two worlds" (1960). He described that divide, and the difficulty of navigating it, as the source of South Africa's racial and developmental ills. The solution, he proposed, was integration. Other white South Africans, both liberal and conservative, proposed the sharpening of segregation at the urban core and the conservation of ethnocultural integrity in countrysides. In all these versions, however, the supposed problem was "the wandering native" (Gillespie 2011): Africans caught between two universes of culture, two incompatible times.

The thesis has proven remarkably resilient. Even as apartheid was beginning to collapse, Leatt wrote of migrant workers' religious commitments as sitting "astride two worlds" (1982). In the 1980s the terms of contrast shifted from modernity versus tradition to first-world versus

third-world conditions (Sharp 1988). This introduced a developmentalism that accorded with late apartheid's neoliberal turn (Hart and Todes 1997). In this century yet another turn has been taken, now contrasting an indigenous world with a colonising one. This brings new possibilities for critique from indigenist standpoints (White 2019). It also does not necessarily share the notion of an encapsulated past surviving awkwardly into the present. In its more critical forms it embraces Afromodernism, thus disturbing dualist temporalities and older African formulations of the same outlook have also often been more creative, more coeval (Dlamini 2023). This is not a surprise, because those formulations do not take the persistence of tradition as a problem to be contained. In more populist or conservative versions, however, even the post-apartheid embrace of the indigenous locates it in a past that co-exists tensely now with an alienating, colonising sociocultural order (White 2011).

Refutations of this dualism are well-known enough. It has been shown since at least Mafeje (1971) to be a colonial ideology that turns spatial and cultural differences, along with inequalities, into distances in the evolution of culture and its representative peoples. And something like that claim has an even older genealogy in regional anthropology, dating to post-functionalist criticisms of Malinowski's analysis of culture change as proceeding from encounters that create third spaces of creolisation (1938; 1945). As soon as Malinowski proposed this based on his visit to South Africa in 1934, others countered that sociocultural distances here did not emerge from given differences that came into encounter, but from an overarching, unified order of racial separation. Gluckman (1958) prefigured Mamdani (1996; 2012) by decades in making that claim (also see Schapera 1935; Wilson 1941; 1942).

Dualism also misrepresents the regional history of African agriculture. As Bundy (1979) showed, the rise of South Africa's modern mining industry in the later nineteenth century saw a corresponding rise in commercial peasant production in African countrysides not yet made into peripheries. The twentieth century saw the deliberate destruction of that class of commercial farmers. The predominance of subsistence production in twentieth-century Southern African peripheries is thus more an outcome of colonial developments than a survival of premodern ways (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Parson 1984).

These critics were correctly suspicious of dualist claims about the supposed externality of difference. But does living together mean living only synchronously? Fabian (1983) is among the canonical critics of the colonial denial of covealism. In a trenchant response to this position, Stasch (2009, 10–11) asks how Fabian is so sure that synchronicity is the natural horizon of human interaction. Indeed, one need not be a reader either of Nietzsche or of Freud to know that the human condition is to live nonsynchronously. Even as individuals our lives are occupied by personal pasts and futures. Why should this be different for our sociocultural orders, including racial capitalism whether colonial or postcolonial (White 2004)? Other times are always implicated in human interactions. If we leave behind the assumption that synchronicity is a norm and therefore that violations of synchronicity warrant criticism, how could we think differently about time, difference and colonial or postcolonial capitalism? A more capacious approach could be found in a modified version of Wolpe's argument. But let us start by revisiting what Wolpe had to say.

Kinship's unpaid shift

"Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power" argued that Southern African capitalism departed from metropolitan forms of capitalist development and that this explained the political history of the region. That exceptionalism is actually the weakest point of the argument. Wolpe's insights apply to racialised and gendered capitalism more generally, not just in Southern Africa. But let us unpack them on their own terms. This requires a detour into Marx's social theory, the tradition of critique in which Wolpe locates his argument.

In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx (1976) argued that the wage is fundamental to the social order that emerges under capitalist development. Two points are crucial. The first is that the wage

is not a mere payment for services rendered. Unlike in other social orders, labour in capitalist society is not simply a concrete activity that supports social forms and relationships. Labour is itself the primary means of integration into social life. The second is that the mobilisation of labour through the wage makes that labour a commodity. Taken together, these points mean that social existence itself is commodified. But what kind of commodity is labour? The wage that pays it cannot recompense the value it adds to products, for where then would surplus value arise? If labour is a commodity in capitalist society, claimed Marx, it should be grasped the same way as any commodity: its value, expressed as its wage, is the socially necessary labour-time required to produce it. In the case of labour, that means the value of the labour-time invested in the commodities required to create, through their consumption, the capacity to labour for a period of time: daily subsistence, but also what is required to create that capacity over cycles that are eventually cross-generational. Under conditions of dispossession, the wage becomes an even more peculiar form. Labour is the primary means of social integration, but for most it is also the only means of physical survival. Social integration via labour therefore appears to be an animal necessity. This does not afford to us the self-reflexive understanding that we live in the historically contingent time of the capitalist social order. The wage appears to us not as a social form that structures our collective interactions, but rather as a brute external necessity.

Enter Wolpe. In standard Althusserian form he distinguished social formation from mode of production. The twentieth-century South African social formation—more accurately, Southern African, since it sourced labour across the subcontinent—contained two modes of production, he said: capitalist and precapitalist (1972, 432). Like dualism this juxtaposed a dominant capitalist core with precapitalist subsistence-agricultural countrysides, but Wolpe was not a dualist. Citing Houghton he wrote that the co-existence of these modes of production gave rise to "the notion of the 'dual economy'" (1972, 432), but that neither could be understood by itself or without recognising the dominance of the first. The question was rather how these modes articulated and how that was afforded by their differences.[2]

The answer to that question was for Wolpe also the answer to another: what forces had driven the political intensification of existing forms of colonial segregation into what became apartheid? Most existing answers had turned on the ideology of a rising Afrikaner nationalism—specifically, the extent to which its racial policies were a break from or an escalation of the British imperial system of indirect rule (Wolpe 1972, 425–427). Wolpe wished to turn the debate away from ideology to questions about the trajectory of capitalist development in the region. His argument was that apartheid solved a problem for that trajectory, by securing one of its needs: cheap African labour-power.

Cheap African labour-power allowed for the exploitation of mineral and other resources in industries that might otherwise not have been profitable. Low wages therefore drove the development of capitalism in the region. But recall now Marx's account of the wage as a social form. The wage is set at a minimum by the market cost of returning workers to work. That is to say, the wage undergirds the production of human labour-power. It does so both directly and indirectly, through facilitating the production and consumption of material means required for conditions such as life, bodily strength, perhaps certain skills and all such needed for bringing labour-power to hand in the process of production. In Marx's version the wage assumes this function of producing labour-power because its recipients are dispossessed of other means of survival, such as access to resources for independent production. Such dispossession was likewise crucial in making African labour available to South African settler capitalism. Sol Plaatje's contemporaneous record (1998, 9–30) of debates in the South African settler parliament made clear that the Land Act of 1913 was motivated not just by the seizure of African land but also the extraction of African labour from its autonomous shelters. Yet full dispossession would mean creating a permanently urban class of African workers, a prospect at odds with racial segregation. Hence the demarcation of rural reserves for African farming and residence. These reserves play a crucial role in Wolpe's argument.

Domestic production on them was not resourced enough in land to allow for productive autonomy, thus forcing African labour into the market. But the rump of such production that existed did allow for a part of the cost of the production of labour-power to be displaced, from the wage itself to subsistence agricultural activity, therefore to households that engaged in such activity.

This then is the relationship between capitalist and precapitalist production Wolpe posited. The reserves were not just an effect of segregationist ideology. They also facilitated wages that were lower than the cost of reproducing labour-power itself, a fact that allowed for the growth of settler capitalism under otherwise marginal conditions. This was possible insofar as the reserves sustained a constrained form of precapitalist production, especially as domestic subsistence agriculture. Yet the phrasing "insofar as" (Wolpe 1972, 436) is all-important. From the creation of segregationist South Africa in the 1910s, through to its last years in the 1940s, subsistence agriculture in the reserves declined precipitously as a result of the constraints it faced. That decline undermined the precapitalist undergirding of oscillating labour migrancy based on labour-power created at least partially outside the cycle of normal capitalist reproduction. It grew the numbers of Africans seeking urban lives and rights to such. Wolpe saw the transition from segregation to apartheid in the 1950s not just as an intensification of racial domination but also, crucially, as the framework for state efforts to prop up and more deeply control the reserves and their affordance of cheap labour-power. Given the articulation of precapitalist with capitalist production, the decline of the former meant a crisis of accumulation for the latter, with subsequent political effects.

Domestic cycles

Wolpe's model of the articulation of modes of production was only one example of a set of such that arrived in African Studies during the 1970s. In the French anthropology of Africa there were many variations on this theme at the time, including of course Meillassoux's more extended but essentially similar analysis (1981) of what he termed the domestic mode of production and its articulation with Southern African capitalism. Acknowledgements and citations in the texts suggest that Wolpe and Meillassoux were in close conversation as they wrote. Yet most Marxist-leaning anthropologists of Southern Africa had reservations. One was that though Wolpe did afford a historical framing for the rise and decline of this articulation of modes of production, his account of each mode was much more biased to synchronic than to diachronic analysis (Spiegel 1981; 1983). He was also criticised for not providing concepts for the analysis of a topic then central to regional ethnographies: local forms of stratification and difference among rural households.

Why was it, to wit, that ethnographic research revealed differences in conditions of life not only between the region's capitalist core and its rural peripheries, but also among the households of the latter, and dramatically so? If similar constraints and dispossessions applied across these countrysides, why were African households so strongly differentiated in size, organisational complexity, income and consumption, or possession of property such as livestock? The Althusserian model afforded little more insight here than dualism, since both offered a flattened view of social life in the reserves.[3] How then were questions of rural differentiation to be answered? Several anthropologists of the region at that time suggested models that turned instead upon diachrony. I draw here on only two—Colin Murray's work in Lesotho and Andrew Spiegel's work both in Lesotho and in the then-Transkei—but these two provide a good sense of contemporaneous anthropological thinking.

Both Murray and Spiegel referred to the "developmental cycles" of households reliant on migrants' wages. The phrasing draws on an older late-functionalist argument from Fortes (1958), according to which synchronic models of household organisation had failed to take account of the formation and dissolution of domestic groups over time. For Fortes, what might appear as structural differences among households at one time were less so if grasped as representing not different kinds of social organisation but rather different phases in an overall cycle of household formation, expansion, separation and dispersal. Such differences were diachronic effects of

common rules of affinity, filiation and inheritance. Fortes was not concerned with history as such, but could this diachronic approach assist thinking through the differences among households reliant on migrant wages? That was the approach both Spiegel (1979; 1980; 1986) and Murray (1977; 1978; 1981) took.

One finding was against dualism. Households with greater success in subsistence agriculture and livestock holding were not those least reliant on migrants' wages. In fact, greater access to wages enabled greater production in the supposedly precapitalist mode (Murray 1978; Spiegel 1980). The wage was thus essential to what appeared to be precapitalist activity. This reverses Wolpe's account of the external subsidy such agriculture afforded to the wage, but it does not contradict him. He himself had claimed the articulation he described was declining by the 1940s. The difference alerts us instead to historical change.

The temporality of the developmental cycle was fundamental in this relationship between wages and domestic agriculture. Spiegel (1980, 117–118) drew not just on Fortes but also on Chayanov (1966) to track the developmental cycle of Sotho households in relation to their material resources.[4] As marriage and separation from older households established new ones, the latter depended initially quite directly on the wages of adult men for consumption. Over time, the investment of these wages in rural social relations secured both fields and livestock, allowing for greater reliance on apparently noncapitalist activity. This marked a high point in the cycle. Yet as children from these households became adults and formed their own, and as the career of an older migrant came to an end, the ability to channel wages into agriculture declined. That created once again a direct reliance on wages for consumption, instead of indirectly through agriculture. Yet at this phase, Murray (1977) pointed out, access to wages was generationally displaced. Older people now relied on the wages of younger migrants. If they could not secure them through filial support from sons preoccupied with establishing new households of their own, another way they could do so was by extracting payments of bridewealth from their sons-in-law. Persistently high bridewealth in Lesotho was thus in Murray's view not a sign of traditionalist cultural commitments but an effect of the developmental cycle of domestic groups under conditions of migrant labour.

Reproduction and history

Let us start drawing these threads together. I begin with the observation that by the 1970s the capitalist wage was supporting what appeared to be precapitalist activity in rural agricultural peripheries—not, or at least not only, the other way round. Again, this is not itself a critique of Wolpe. His point was precisely that by the middle of the twentieth century independent subsistence agriculture had declined to a point at which its capacity to continue to absorb the costs of the reproduction of labour-power was collapsing. In his view this was part of the impetus for the shift from segregation to apartheid and especially the conversion of the reserves into Bantustans. Bantustan development aimed to stabilise and improve peripheral agriculture, through modernisation from above, while also providing new coercive means to constrain the process of African urbanisation in the core. Yet the Bantustan project also eventually failed at these aims. Dispossession and other constraints made independent development impossible. Much the same applied to spaces outside South Africa such as Lesotho, which had only nominal developmental autonomy, overwhelmingly dependent as it was on wages remitted from South Africa (Murray 1981; Ferguson 1990).

One consequence of that failure was that the Bantustan period saw the transformation of dispersed rural settlements into concentrated villages and townships. This began as an attempt to shore up agriculture through policies of spatial "betterment" that zoned separate areas for housing, fields and grazing (Spiegel 1988). It ended with the demise of domestic farming in peripheral countrysides at any significant scale. Murray (1987) perspicaciously labelled this spatial development "displaced urbanisation." Even the pretence of the survival of a precapitalist mode of production and its associated spatial forms disappeared. As the Bantustans faltered, late

apartheid development sought to meliorate that in turn through industrial decentralisation to those "borders" of a nominally white South Africa that were close to the newly massed settlements in the Bantustans (Hart and Todes 1997). The aim was to replace long-term and long-distance oscillating migration with daily commuting that still returned African labour, if not to a classically rural domain, at least to a township kept legally separate from the white state. Even that failed eventually, as rebellions in the early 1990s dissolved the borders of Bantustans such as Ciskei and Bophuthatswana.

A long-term look at these developments shows a continuous pattern through the changes: intensifying state intervention, that is, to secure conditions for the creation of cheap labour-power as a condition for the accumulation of capital. The low cost of African labour-power was first secured by the preservation of precapitalist production in the reserves on the periphery of the capitalist core. Then it was secured by intensifying and rationalising the management of those lands through grand apartheid. Then it was secured by decentralisation to take industries closer to non-South African townships while keeping the latter outside the core. Arguably, much the same project is continued in the post-apartheid system of cash grants for indigent households, whether in rural or urban spaces and especially in grants for children and the elderly. These are non-productive people in the capitalist sense. Their activity is beyond the remit of the wage as social form, just as the supposedly precapitalist sector of regional production was outside that form—and therefore able to subsidise it.

Wolpe's argument remains relevant then, but its relevance demands a more expanded sense of the wage as the social form linking temporalities of capitalist accumulation with those of domestic life, in the latter case including but not limited to the developmental cycles that ethnographers identified in migrant workers' households in the 1970s. In hindsight, that research was done at the high water mark for employment in South Africa's industrial core. The rise of mass unemployment since may make it seem superficially that the wage is no longer a form with either structural or explanatory force. On the contrary, unemployment is a problem precisely because the wage is the primary means of integration under capital. That is why the lack of it is a suffering. An empirical shortage is not a structural irrelevance.

Nor is any of this unique to Southern Africa. In a review of Meillassoux that could apply equally to Wolpe, Hadas Weiss (2018) shows that this analysis has global reach. The consistent theme is the unpaid work of women in sustaining forms of human reproduction that supply labour-power to capital. The discount this unpaid labour affords to the wage is not a Southern African exception but a central feature of the reproduction of capitalism. The same point grounds the large feminist literature on social reproduction (see, for example, Federici 2004), where the term social is meant rather awkwardly to indicate noncapitalist. As Weiss (2022) argues further, it makes no sense to regard spheres of "social reproduction" as simply opposed and in conflict with the processes of capitalist accumulation—as Bozzoli (1983) for instance argued versus Wolpe for the Southern African case. In addition to what such spheres mean for their members, whose purposeful activity sustains them, they are essential to the reproduction of capital precisely because they allow it to externalise one of its costs.

This has important implications for ethnography. In Southern African histories and ethnographies, as Dubbeld (2020) points out, capitalism has often been treated as "context" for the purposes of analysing more finely-grained relations and activities. But just as relations of reproduction in households are not in a simple sense external to the reproduction of capital, as per Weiss (2022), nor are the forms of capitalist society simply contexts or constraints for those relations. Capital does not directly determine them. Their concrete determination is largely irrelevant to its cycles, as long as they create labour-power. But the circulation of capitalist social forms such as the wage is at once an element of the reproduction of capital and an element of the creation of those relationships. In capitalist society, households exist not only by means of wages but also because of the form of the wage itself—whether directly through enforced reliance on

it under conditions of dispossession, or more widely because their function is to lower the cost of labour-power. Households are moments of capital as much as they are moments of kinship. In such circumstances, ethnographic descriptions of domestic life cannot proceed as if forms of capital, such as labour-power and wages, are not themselves intrinsic to the microscopic unit of observation (to draw on an older empiricist phrasing), but instead simply hypothetical parts of the macroscopic unit of analysis. Let me demonstrate that last point by discussing the composition of household membership.

Dispersal and nonsynchronicity

Developmental cycles based on migrant careers are not the only way ethnographers have studied the impacts of wages on domestic temporalities. Murray (1981), Reynolds (1989), Ross (1995), Spiegel (1986; 2018) and many others have noted for a long time that African households throughout Southern Africa are characterised by remarkable fluidity in contemporaneous residential membership. This is not just about the goings and comings of adults who work at a distance. It is also about the dispersal of dependants such as children. Placing young people in households other than those they were born to is an ancient feature of social life in the region. It has been a way of dealing with conquest, infertility and many other such circumstances. In the society of the wage it has also become a matter of moving dependants around to deal with issues such as the distance of wages from care, to tap into cross-household networks of care and income, to gain access to the social wage of infrastructures and services and to cope with sudden reversals of employment situations. Under these conditions, residential turnover has become normal and very frequent, but as unpredictable as the apparently external situations to which it adapts.

As Murray wrote decades ago, this fluidity makes it "difficult in some cases to identify *de jure* household membership with any confidence" (1981, 56–57). It certainly contradicts older functionalist accounts that treated domestic groups as synchronic concretisations of cultural rules regarding kinship, affinity and residence. It even complicates the later work, already discussed, on developmental cycles of domestic groups supported by oscillating migrant labour. To the centuries-long diachrony of regional history and the decades-long diachrony of domestic cycles, it adds a diachrony on scales of only years, even months. To Murray this presents challenges for ethnographers seeking granular accounts of dynamics that synchronic models cannot explain. But the epistemological difficulty is not restricted to external analysis. In my own experience in northern KwaZulu-Natal and I imagine much more widely, it provokes endogenous reckonings too. I have written elsewhere in more detail on those reflections (White 2004; 2011; 2013; 2016). Here I simply mention some general features of them that extend and further complicate the picture.

For a start, endogenous discourse marks differences between everyday and normative compositions of household membership. Most households in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal are multigenerational institutions anchored by at least two generations of adult women—elders with their daughters and/or daughters-in-law—along with their respective children and with other women and men who are related to them either bilaterally or in some degree of affinity—the latter sometimes but often not being marriage, whether customary or civil. Within this broad description there are many permutations, especially the larger households become. Few if any of these are exceptional compared to the range of household compositions throughout the racialised margins of twenty-first century Southern Africa, rural and urban alike.[5] Nonetheless, most of those permutations do not align neatly with endogenous models of normative composition for domestic groups. The latter present the domestic group as an agnatic institution where the anchoring ties bind at least two generations of adult men, then subsequently incorporate wives and children.

Endogenous discourse around this difference presents the agnatic model as tradition disturbed by modern departure. If positive history were the measure of tradition, such claims would struggle in the face of archaeological evidence for the variety of spatial—by implication, social—patterns in households of what we now call northern KwaZulu-Natal, across centuries of precolonial

African creativity (Hall 1984). But that criticism assumes that the proper relation of past to present is one in which such times are separate and therefore that assertions in the latter about the former are to be judged in terms of historically scaffolded facts. That is not the paradigm wherein most discourse about domestic tradition proceeds in northern KwaZulu-Natal. In such discourse, which mostly occurs in settings anthropologists call ritual, concerns about past time are instead relational and ethical, where relatives who lived in the past are called upon to participate (broadly speaking, as ancestors) in collective resolutions of current problems. That requires addressing them with terms and forms they are understood to recognise as values, not as supposedly historical facts. Such address is difficult if households are composed otherwise, both socially and spatially, but creative rearrangements of living space and the substitution of representative persons afford the aspirational means for a co-presence not just in one time but across time too.

This all affords an ordering of time much more complex than suggested either by synchrony or by diachronies that are restricted to the juxtaposition of moments in linear time, no matter whether the latter be the time of regional history, the time of the developmental cycles of domestic groups, or the time wherein the co-residence of living people is fluid. The dead are also co-resident. Just as living members of households come more or less into proximity and attention, as situations change, so do they. They also do this not just as cooperative audiences for ritual work but as assertive, sometimes difficult, interlocutors in their own right. As I have described in other work, cited above, they bring needs and demands from their own unresolved past times, requiring retrospective repair. What is more, and again like living members of households, the resolution of their needs requires monetary expenditure for the materials of sacrifice and other such gestures of care.

Ultimately, in other words, their care depends on the wage. Responsibility for such care is dispersed and distributed accordingly, just as for living dependants. Also, such efforts to repair relations with them are very often motivated directly by the misfortunes of their survivors in the labour market. Unemployment is a harm because the wage is the primary means of social inclusion. Appealing to the dead to care for their survivors, who reciprocally care for them, often means asking the dead explicitly to help the living find work and support their households, including members both living and dead, both resident and not. Even as the labour market changes, participants in it are brought into domestic proximity through acts of care and request that cross generations and the temporal locations of their social lives. That labour market, and its wages, remain nonetheless intrinsic to domestic acts of care.

Three points follow. First, households on Southern Africa's peripheries cannot be understood without regard to diachronous relationships that occur not just through time but across it. That makes them, to invoke a term from critical theory, nonidentical. They are never the same as themselves. That is not trivial. It complicates criticisms of dualism that insist we only live properly when we live synchronously. Second, all these relationships hinge ultimately on the wage as the primary form of social inclusion under capital. Living or dead, persons cared for in households on Southern Africa's peripheries are cared for insofar as the wage—whether directly or through social wages such as cash grants—allows kinship to be materialised. Third, these wage-afforded materialisations of kinship as care give households the capacity to provide a supply of cheap labour-power to capital—a crucial function for the overall social order, in which they are nonetheless marginalised.

Conclusion

Rural Southern African households are locations, then, of complex temporal orders. They have developmental cycles. They change over time, that is, in ways that relate the careers and wages of working adults to processes of affinity, filiation and dispersal, as well as to material undergirdings of farming. An ethnographic attention to those cycles explains differences among households that exist under the broadly similar historical constraints, revealing them to be moments in the cyclical articulation of capital and kinship through the wage. That articulation also has its histories, at scales both large and small.

Macroscopically, it has developed through the history of colonial and postcolonial Southern Africa. It began as an articulation of capitalist and precapitalist production that subsumed the latter into the former as a discount to the wage—a formal subsumption, in Marxist terms and possible insofar as rural production was at least partially autonomous. When rural agriculture itself became dependent on wages, this shifted to real subsumption but sustained the dualist appearance of distance. In late apartheid that distance broke down further through the conversion of rural settlements into locations of displaced urbanisation both in appearance as well as in livelihood. Farming has continued to decline for most households during the post-apartheid period, at the same time as more uniform national access to infrastructures, services and social grants has still further erased appearances of difference between rural and urban households. State intervention has nonetheless continued to prop up households as institutions that create labour-power for low wages without full reliance on direct wages. Microscopically, on the other hand, vicissitudes of access to wages and movements of adults in search of them mean that households also shift membership all the time. Dependants are likewise dispersed and moved to cope with unpredictable shifts in employment. Both memberships and relationships unfold not just in successions of present times only, though. They are also woven through with nonsynchronicities that articulate past and present. This takes place not least through ongoing interactions with the deceased, who carry their own lifetimes with them into their relationships with the living.

An attention to the wage as social form and to the complex temporalities of households structured by wages either directly or indirectly, therefore allows us both a large-scale and a granular understanding of relationships between capital and kinship. This reminds us of the careful dialectical craft of tracing links among social forms that unfold on many scales of time but always in relation to all such at once (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 121–122). In the end, the relation in question is perhaps best described not just as an articulation between kinship and capital but also of each of these through the forms of the other, as a revisiting of Wolpe and his critics helps us see.

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Notes

1 Strikingly, as Breckenridge (2021) notes, this is also the period during which capitalist development in Africa became marginal to the theorisation of capitalism in general.
2 Wolpe himself invokes "articulation" only with reference to race and class, not modes of production, but it is clear that the latter is his topic. He addresses it with phrasings such as "the changing relations of capitalist and African pre-capitalist modes of production" (1972, 425).
3 There were exceptions, such as Innes and O'Meara's (1976) more granular account of social dynamics in the rural Eastern Cape, even if these still remained in a largely synchronic paradigm.
4 Spiegel points out (personal communication) that the isolation of the reserves also suppressed demand on the wage by reducing expectations of domestic consumption.
5 This is the topic of too vast a literature to cite representatively. Some notable recent accounts include Cousins (2023), Dahl (2016), Henderson (2011), Hickel (2015), Hunter (2016), Makhulu (2015) and Mkhwanazi and Manderson (2021).

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