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White Farms, Black Labour: Agrarian Transition in Rural South Africa, 1930-70

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Synopsis

This paper is an outline of a research project on white-farm labour which is just beginning. It examines some of the issues involved in the development of white commercial agriculture's labour systems since 1930. The focus is on the arc of territory running across the northern and eastern Transvaal and south to Swaziland and northern Natal.

The role of modern industry in the development and entrenchment of racial discrimination and segregation in South Africa is widely recognized. No sector was more important in this process than "white" agriculture. During its decades of most rapid growth after 1930, white agriculture employed more black workers by far than any other part of the economy, including mining. Farming, like mining, was a pillar of the low-wage labour system that still characterizes the economy. Despite rapid growth of output, increasing mechanization and improved profitability, farmers shared few of these benefits with their workers. Cash wages remained low or absent, working conditions abysmal and living standards pitiful for most farm workers.

A formidable apparatus of state repression underwrote the system through pass laws and influx-control regulations to prevent workers from fleeing to better-paid employment in the expanding cities. Despite this, workers and their families became increasingly successful in evading the worst farm employers. The farmers in turn demanded and got even more draconian measures of labour control. As their resident labour force dwindled, they began, like the mining industry, to recruit at a distance, using recruiting companies to draw labour from neighbouring territories and even further afield.

Although scholars are devoting increasing attention to the agricultural history of southern Africa, the labour system that developed on white farms has not been extensively studied. This project will examine the changing place of black labour on the white farms and agribusinesses of the North-eastern Transvaal, Swaziland, Natal and Zululand. This area is important for the size and variety of the farming units established there and for the highly competitive labour-acquisition and retention tactics employed by both farmers and other employers. Labour conditions were usually bad, but the means used to secure, retain and treat black farm workers were diverse. Located along the migration routes of African migrants flooding into South Africa from impoverished territories further north, farmers in these areas tried to monopolize the inward flow and to prevent the workers moving to better paid employment in the cities and towns. The overall functioning of the migrant-labour system can thus be illuminated by putting the focus on a strategic part of the agricultural sector. As an adjacent territory with a substantial white farming community, Swaziland offers an important comparison with South Africa. For most of the period covered by this study, it was administered separately by the British government.

The project covers the period from the 1930's, when farm output in these areas began to respond sharply to the stimulus of improving economic conditions, government subsidies and protective marketing arrangements. It ends with the 1960's and early 1970's, which saw accelerating economic and technological transformation of white farming and the resulting dispossession

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of hundreds of thousands of farm workers. Most of them were simply dumped in the so-called Homelands, areas long since denuded of economic opportunity, agricultural potential, basic services and hope. We propose to examine both the policies developed by the farmers and the state to manage an increasingly anachronistic labour system and the struggles of workers and their families to resist this. While the main sources are archival, oral data, which is increasingly available, will be used to illuminate the experiences of black sharecroppers, labour tenants and migrants.

The Project

Over the last 20 years, various aspects of South African labour history have been extensively studied. In particular, scholars have focused on the entrenchment of a system of oscillating labour migration in the gold mines.1/ Other works have examined the labour patterns which accompanied industrialization and the rapid growth of settled black urban communities, particularly during and after World War II.2/ Manufacturing industries tended to mobilize and use black labour in ways that were quite different from the mining industry, and these studies have drawn attention to this. By contrast, the development and transformation of the labour system on white-owned farms has received only sporadic attention. This is perhaps somewhat surprising since until the 1960's, the white farms employed far more black workers than any other economic sector, including mining. White farming, like mining, was a bastion of low-wage labour in South Africa. The political power of white farmers and the economic importance of the gold mines ensured that the system remained intact, for farming into the 1960's and for gold mining up to the present. We know much about the policies and motivations of the mining companies and the response of their black workers to them but very little about the parallel situation on the farms in these decades. For most of the history of this century, we also know much more about conditions in the black reserves than those in white agriculture.3/

Francis Wilson's pioneering study of farming in the second volume of the Oxford History of South Africa (1971) highlighted the importance of the subject. Subsequently, he published an important collection of essays on farm labour.4/ But this work was aimed at the post-1948 period, consequently contained very little archival research and managed only to scratch the surface of the farm labour system. Most other writing on the white farm sector has tended to be policy-oriented, focusing on the relations between white farmers, mine-owners, and the South African state.5/ In the 1970s, Michael Morris raised several important theoretical questions from a structural marxist position on the nature of agrarian transition in South Africa.6/ Recent critiques have taken issue with Morris' theoretical categories and with his insensitivity to geographical and temporal unevenness in the overall process.7/ Keegan, in particular, has argued for a disaggregated view of the transition: "what emerges is less a unilinear, homogenous transition to capitalism, taking place in readily definable stages, but a far more complex, ambiguous and multi-faceted process of change".8/ Exploration of the complex and varied historical experience of black farmworkers on white farms has focused mainly on the period before 1930. Labour conditions on the wine and wheat farms of the western Cape in the nineteenth century have been examined in several recent dissertations.9/ The indentured labour system in the Natal sugar plantations has, likewise, received some attention.10/ The early history of black sharecropping and labour tenancy on the farms of the South African "maize belt" has been a more systematic focus for scholars.11/ The culmination of this research effort is an important collection of essays gathered in Putting a Plough to the Ground which have already done much to illuminate the variegated processes of rural transformation in South Africa before 1930.12/

Other isolated studies of white farming areas have illustrated how draconian farm labour legislation was contested, with variable success, on the ground.13/ Black rural politics in the white farm areas have been studied by Bradford.14/ Her analysis shows how the ICU in the 1920s tried briefly, though unsuccessfully, to capitalize on widespread and intense popular discontent in the countryside. Beinart and Bundy's study has revealed the vitality of rural protest and radicalism in the eastern Cape before 1930.15/ For the period after 1930, the literature is much weaker. Isolated studies on the years after 1930 have examined working conditions in the Natal sugar industry and the citrus estates of the northern Transvaal.16/ Charles Simkins has provided a statistical overview of demographic and wage trends during this period.17/ There is also a significant contemporaneous investigative literature on farm labour conditions which forms an important source for the present study.18/ At the other end of the period of study - the era of farm mechanization, mass expulsions and forced resettlement - the literature again becomes more voluminous.19/ The years between 1930 and 1970 brought major changes in the white countryside. Yet the pace of change was ragged and uneven. In most western societies, the transformation of agricultural productivity was a precondition for industrialization. It freed labour and provided capital for investment in commerce and eventually industry; the productivity of the agricultural sector, achieved typically at heavy human cost, was crucial to the development and diversification of these economies overall. South Africa's agricultural history was very different. There, white agriculture remained backward and inefficient well into the twentieth century. Far from generating surplus for investment in other economic sectors, it required constant infusions of state support. Ecological conditions retarded agriculture for generations. With some notable exceptions, farmers were slow to innovate, slow to develop the techniques needed to succeed in such conditions. They tended to use their labour as wastefully and thoughtlessly as they used the other factors of production. Active cruelty compounded neglect and indifference to suffering to blight the lives of most farm workers.

When agricultural output on white farms did begin to improve rapidly in the 1930's and 40's, it did so in very special circumstances. By that point black peasant agriculture, which had earlier competed effectively with white farming, was clearly in decline. Those peasant families who managed to retain their land in the wars of dispossession of the 19th century had fought a long rearguard action. Many had become landless. For others, rising population in the restricted reserves, the application of a host of discriminatory laws and practices by the state, and the promotion of migrant labour for work on white farms and industries placed crushing obstacles in their path.

White farmers, by contrast, received constant nurturing from governments, which subsidized their production, applied price- support mechanisms, cushioned them from climatic adversity and protected them from debt. More than other sectors, white agriculture depended on direct and indirect subsidies from gold mining. Every South African government after Union taxed the gold mines in order to subsidize farming.

At the same time discriminatory policies directed against black peasant agriculture removed a potential source of cheap food and of competition to white farming. Above all, the state made sure that the white farms had guaranteed access, free of competition, to large pools of unskilled, inexpensive black labour. The effect of this was to distort the development of farming in South Africa, to divert resources from other areas which would have used them more productively and to depress farm wages. The development of the country's wage labour force was crippled, as state policy kept tens of thousands of blacks with their families as tied, unskilled, badly paid workers on white farms. It kept them there until the 1960's when a variety of factors

led widespread removals as part of a process of dispossession of millions of black residents in the white farming areas.

As farmers faced increasing competition from other sectors in the period after 1930, they demanded and got further severe measures to bind their workers to them. For most of this century, therefore, South Africa has been farmed, in de Kiewiet's words, "from the two capitals". Without state management of a servile labour force, without constant injections of public funds, tariff protection and direct subsidies, South African white agriculture, which was initially generally backward, starved for capital and lacking in productivity, could never have developed into the modern agribusiness which now exports to southern Africa and around the world.

Because manufacturing and service industries increasingly drew workers out of the ranks of migrant labour, the development of a large, permanent urban proletariat was at the expense of the low- wage employers, the mining and farming industries. Even with the much more draconian elaboration of influx control in and after 1945 and the further restrictions introduced by the Malan government, permanent black urbanization continued at a high rate. Through most of this period governments found themselves in an increasingly difficult position. By legislation they had apparently accepted the responsibility for the allocation of labour that the low wage employers, in particular, wanted to saddle them with. Yet at the same time, they lacked the bureaucratic capacity and the will to do this effectively. As Greenberg explains, they had politicized the problem without developing the capacity to manage it.

Despite the worsening labour situation, the mines and farms continued to be low-wage employers and continued to lose workers to the urban labour market. Secondary industry and other employment in town offered more attractive conditions of services than the mines and farms did, better wages and greater freedom. Both farmers' associations and the Chamber of Mines identified growing urban employment as a principal reason for these shortages. Yet competition for labour from the emerging industrial sector had little effect on wages or conditions on either mines or farms. Why was this so? While recent research has shown that increasingly stringent influx control regulations failed to protect the labour supplies of the low-wage employers, the reasons why this did not force major improvements in wages and conditions of service and perhaps the abandonment of migrancy itself remain unexamined. At the same time, despite constant complaints of shortage, expansion of agricultural and mining output and employment continued at a steady rate. There has been no explanation of this paradox. Indeed none is available if the analysis is confined to the South African labour market alone.

By the end of the 1950's, the labour situation on white farms had changed from one of labour shortage to labour surplus. Conventionally, this is explained by reference to large-scale mechanization, the need for a smaller but more skilled workforce and the consequent dismissal and relocation of hundreds of thousands of farm workers (part of the much larger forced removal of over three million Africans from white areas since the early 1950's). The causes of the transformation of shortage into surplus are, however, complex, and simple mechanization (which anyway was very unevenly introduced) cannot explain all of it.

The 1950's saw a resurgence of rural radicalism in South Africa to a degree not experience since the 1920's. Our knowledge of this is confined to the outbreaks of rioting and militancy which occurred in various Homelands, notably Pondoland. It seems that farmworkers and tenants were not involved in the early stages, but there is a need to investigate the impact of the upsurge of popular protest in some of the Homelands among Africans in the white areas.

Certainly there is evidence of extreme radicalism among the latter in the late 1960's as the pace of the removals accelerated.

There is a particular need then for a full-scale examination of the historical development since 1930 of the labour system on white farms. As well as reconstructing the general contours of agrarian change in South Africa as a whole, the present project has a regional focus which will permit detailed ground-level examination of the processes and forces of change. Little is known about life and labour on the white farming belt which stretches from the northern Transvaal, through the eastern Transvaal, Swaziland and into northern Natal. A focus on this "eastern arc" is of particular interest for the following reasons. First, the region is one of great environmental, and therefore productive, diversity. Different forms of agriculture - ranching, cash-crop cultivation, forestry, sugar plantations, and citrus estates - had different labour needs and generated considerable differences in farm conditions. Second, the arc is composed of farming units of widely divergent size and degree of capitalization. Agribusiness took over large tracts of land during the period under study. Right next door, individual white farmers continued to utilize archaic and thoroughly repressive forms of labour control. Across the "white" countryside, black "squatters" struggled to survive as tenants on underutilized land. Third, in Swaziland, British agribusiness capital transformed the physical and social landscape in the 1940s and 1950s. The "eastern arc" therefore contains an important enclave of progressive capitalist agriculture aided and abetted by a different form of political control. Fourth, the white farms of the region are located in close proximity to reserve areas demarcated by the South African state. The presence of alternative pools of labour, and the existence of a refuge (however meagre) for farm labourers, affected the labour system on the farms, and the terrain of struggle between farmers and workers. Finally, the labour routes for "illicit" migrants from the colonies to the east and north crossed this area. Indeed, the farms in this region were major employers of foreign migrant labour throughout this period. One of the major tasks of this study is a thorough examination of this migrant labour system as it operated on the white farms.

The sources available for this study are extensive and have been little used. A preliminary examination of some of the major collections has revealed a very rich body of archival material. It illuminates the political battles of the white farmers from the time of Union to preserve their traditional way of using their low-wage labour tenants and the struggles of the workers and their families to escape this. While there is a growing literature on these issues for the period before 1930, the following decades when white farming was experiencing its most rapid growth and transformation remain largely unexplored. We propose to extend and develop the themes outlined in these works through an analysis of the labour systems on white farms during the decades of their most rapid development.

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