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1996-09-16
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SEMINAR PAPER
TO BE PRESENTED IN THE RICHARD WARD BUILDING
SEVENTH FLOOR, SEMINAR ROOM 7003
AT 4PM ON THE**16 SEPTEMBER 1996**.

TITLE: The Political Economy of White Working Class Housing in Johannesburg, 1890-1906

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NO: 408

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF WHITE WORKING CLASS HOUSING IN JOHANNESBURG, 1890-1906[1]

MARIA LIS LANGE

1. INTRODUCTION

The discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand was followed by the proclamation of public diggings in 1886. Ten years later (1897) when Johannesburg was given municipal status, it had a population of 102,000 inhabitants and extended over 5 square miles. By 1904 the population had increased to 158,000 and the city covered 82 square miles.

From the outset land was the most important area of investment outside the mines of the Witwatersrand goldfields. The monopoly that township companies and mining houses, through their estate companies, exercised over the land had a direct bearing on the high rents and general lack of housing in the city.

In the aftermath of the South African War (1899-1902) the new colonial state embarked on large scale social engineering aimed at the stabilisation of the white working class on the Rand. An essential part of this strategy was to achieve the reproduction of the white working class through the agency of the nuclear family. Instrumental to this project was the encouragement of the immigration of British working class families to the Transvaal.[2] This policy was going to be seriously, though not exclusively, undermined by the characteristics of the land and housing market in Johannesburg.

South African historians have emphasised the importance and scope of Milner's social engineering.[3] Nevertheless, they have not explained the seemingly contradictory lack of direct

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[1] I would like to thank Helena Pohlandt for her patient and insightful editing.

[2] On this topic see M. Streak, **Lord Milner's Immigration Policy for the Transvaal, 1897-1905**, (Rand Afrikaans University Publication 1969) and D. Denoon, **A Grand Illusion**, (London 1973).

[3] Especially, S. Marks and S. Trapido, "Lord Milner and the South African State", **History Workshop**, 8, 1979, pp. 50-80; and C. van Onselen, "The World the Mine Owners Made: Social Themes in the Economic Transformation of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914", **Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914, 1. New Babylon**, (Johannesburg 1982).

state intervention in the housing problem. This paper suggests that it is necessary to rethink the economic, political and social imperatives of the Reconstruction period (1901-1906), particularly in what refers to the formation of the white working class, in the light of the new research on urban development and town planning in South Africa and other western capitalist cities.[4]

This paper will try to combine both the study of the political economy of white working class housing with the social history of working class accommodation in Johannesburg between 1890 and 1906. It will be shown first that the characteristics of landownership in Johannesburg conditioned not only the availability of actual housing but also the implementation of certain aspects of town planning proposed by the government. Secondly, it will become clear that state intervention in the housing problem was shaped by a mixture of *laissez-faire* and social engineering which in turn conditioned white working class settlement in Johannesburg. Finally, it will be shown that, in spite of being in line with world trends, town planning in Johannesburg had specific features which derived from the colonial situation.

2. THE ORIGINS OF THE HOUSING PROBLEM: LAND AND PROPERTY MARKET IN JOHANNESBURG, 1886-1906.

The Gold Law of 1888 that governed the distribution of mining claims was devised to deal mainly with alluvial diggings such as those in Pilgrim's Rest (1873). The diggers were allowed to peg out a certain area of ground, a "claim", in which they could, against the payment of a monthly licence, dig and wash the alluvial deposits. It soon became evident to the diggers that it was not always either convenient or comfortable to pitch their tents on the claims. Thus, they established their camps on neighbouring ground, a "stand", that was not suitable for mining. The owner of such land, whether the government or a private person, asked for a monthly payment for the use of this ground.

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[4] A. Mabin, "Origins of Segregatory Urban Planning In South Africa, 1900-1940", **Planning History** 13 (1991), pp. 8-16; S. Parnell, "Creating Racial Privilege. The Origins of South African Public Health and Town Planning Legislation", **Journal of Southern African Studies**, 19, 3, (1993), pp. 471-488; S. Parnell, Johannesburg's slums and social segregation in cities, 1910-1937, Ph.D Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1993; V. Bickford-Smith, **Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town. Group Identity and Social Practice, 1875-1902**, (Cambridge 1995). Although this paper is not intended as a comparative study, reference will be made to other non- African case studies such as London, Detroit and particularly Buenos Aires.

At the time of the discovery of the Witwatersrand goldfields the proclamation of the public diggings and the survey of a particular area set aside for stands were done simultaneously. The area selected to establish the village of stands was the piece of ground known as Randjeslaagte. This farm comprised about 600 acres that lay from what are today Commissioner Street along West Street and Diagonal Street northward to a point at the corner of Louis Botha Avenue and East Avenue. It was chosen for two reasons: its centrality and the fact that the state was the owner of the land and therefore benefited from the sale of stand leases.

Under the Gold Law of 1888 stand licences started off as a form of rent paid to the government for the use of a stand, and although it was assumed that the use of the ground would continue as long as payments were made, the system was not one of a freehold tenure. In less than ten years the development of townships on government and private land *de facto* transformed the right of the diggers to pitch a tent into a form of tenure similar to freehold and changed the stand licence from a payment for the use of land into a tax owed to the government for administrative purposes. This process had great importance when township companies started buying land in Johannesburg. On the one hand, it moulded the relationship between township companies and the local authorities. On the other hand, the Gold Law influenced not only the characteristics of tenure on proclaimed government lands but also on privately owned land. The relatively small amount paid in taxes encouraged accumulation of land in the hands of a few estate companies which in turn tended to withhold land from the market closing it to development for speculative purposes. This had two main consequences, first, the artificial scarcity of land drove up the prices both of land and accommodation; and second, it reduced the availability of land for building purposes in the city and its suburbs.

The Gold Law in its two versions, (1888 and 1898), established the relations between the state, private owners of land and those miners who were working mining claims on both state and private land. The Law distinguished between mineral rights and surface rights in a proclaimed area. According to the 1898 Gold Law the state had the right to the mining and disposition of all minerals and only the government could proclaim public diggings.[5] This guaranteed the exclusive power of the state to adjudicate mineral rights (i.e. claims) to private persons both when the deposits were on government land and to dispose of the mineral rights when the

[5] **Report of the Gold Law Commission 1901-1902**, 1902, p. xxx.

deposits were on privately owned land. Those powers did not however, extend to surface rights (i.e. stands) in the case of privately owned land.

Mineral rights on public or private land did not give full title to the use of the surface. Accordingly, the law established that the remaining portion (that is what was left once "mynpacht" and homestead had been marked out) of proclaimed mineralised ground could be occupied by the government free of charge and used for constructing roads, erecting public buildings, and to be surveyed as stands.[6] This condition of the Gold Law was going to be at the centre of a controversy between the mining companies and the local authorities after the South African War.

The Gold Law referred only to proclaimed land. Nevertheless, when township companies bought farm land and created townships in non-proclaimed areas, they established the tenure of the stands according to the Gold Law. Thus, instead of selling them on freehold, i.e. in full property, the township companies sold their stands on leasehold, i.e. they sold the use of the land, not the land itself. This system of tenure was thought to be particularly suitable in the context of the uncertain economic future that Johannesburg seemed to have in the late 1880s. But at the same time it guaranteed the speculative nature of land ownership and the property market and accentuated the unstable nature of the population.

Amongst the most important township companies operating in Johannesburg were the Witwatersrand Township Estate and Financial Corporation; the Johannesburg Consolidated Investment Company; and the Braamfontein Estate Company. All three of them were closely linked to mining interests.

The Witwatersrand Township Estate and Financial Corporation belonged to the Gold Mining Corporation. Through a process of absorbtion from other estate companies by the end of the South African War it had managed to acquire 742 acres of land divided into 5,397 stands spread between the townships of Jeppestown, Fordsburg, Wolhuter, North Doornfontein, Jeppestown South, Bellevue East and Spes Bona.

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[6] **Report of the Gold Law**..., p. xxiv.

Johannesburg Consolidated Investment Company was the estate company of Corner House. The company owned 2,380 acres divided into 5,238 stands that corresponded to the townships of Berea, Yeoville, Houghton, and Old Doornfontein. Finally, Braamfontein Estate Company, also connected to the Corner House mining group, owned the townships of Braamfontein and Parktown.

It is clear from this that the mining companies not only controlled part of the surface rights on the actual mines, but they were, through their estate or township companies, the largest land owners in Johannesburg. In practice the estate companies dominated the land market. This power in turn was further entrenched by the growth of the population and the increasing demand for housing.

Proclamation was the legal procedure by which a township was recognised as such. The fact that proclamation in itself was not enforced by law allowed for an important loophole at the time of paying taxes. Small residential freeholds in a non-proclaimed town were not different, according to the law, from a subdivision of a farm and therefore paid a farm tax that was substantially lower than the town tax. This system encouraged the accumulation of land by estate companies. Where the ground was not proclaimed they had to pay a farm tax that was negligible and where the ground was proclaimed, the bare land was taxed only 10s annually regardless of its value.

The fact that most of the land surrounding Johannesburg proper was held on freehold or leasehold by private owners, mainly township companies, shaped the most characteristic feature of the political economy of housing in Johannesburg. In the years after the South African War the high prices of land and rent resulting from the powerful position of these companies in the land market were going to become stumbling blocks for the permanent settlement of people in Johannesburg.

During the Reconstruction period, the project of extension of Johannesburg's boundaries of 1901, the Rating Bill of 1903 and the Vrededorp Stands Ordinance of 1906, represented three different ways in which colonial administrators and the municipality dealt with the land issue. While the first two approaches were designed to indirectly harness the speculative nature of land ownership by township companies, the third one represented the new authorities' attempt to unify tenure in the city and to abolish special rights over town lands.

Lionel Curtis, who in 1901 had been appointed Town Clerk by Lord Milner by reason of his municipal experience in London, saw with trepidation Johannesburg's pattern of urbanisation. In his memorandum on the extension of Johannesburg's boundaries, he argued that sooner or later this pattern of urbanisation would reproduce the separation between affluent and poor neighbourhoods that prevailed in London. In Johannesburg the line of the reef had already isolated the well-to-do areas in the north of the city from the mines and its satellite working class neighbourhoods in the south. To begin to change this pattern it was necessary to incorporate the mines and the northern suburbs into the municipal area extending the jurisdiction of the Town Council from a 3 miles radius from Market Square to a 6 miles radius.

The extension of the jurisdiction of the Town Council would imply not only the establishment of a unified administration, but also that rates would be levied on the mines' property. The Chamber of Mines reacted swiftly to what it considered a most unfair situation. The mines, the Chamber explained, could never be seen as an important residential area. Their general unhealthy conditions made them unsuitable for habitation purposes for anybody other than mining employees. Also, the further development of deep level mines necessarily implied more ground taken up for mining purposes. This ground would, according to the Gold Law of 1898, be immediately excluded from taxation.

It is noteworthy that in their attempt to avoid their inclusion in the municipal area and therefore their liability to pay rates and taxes, the mines changed their own politics. Under the South African Republic the mining industry was viewed as striving for the political rights of the *uitlanders*, and it pressed on the government the imperative need of having British workers settled on the Witwatersrand. Now, under a British administration, the Chamber of Mines opposed their workers being included on the municipal voters roll, a necessary consequence of the extension of the municipal area, on the grounds that the nominal rents they paid did not qualify them as occupiers. Interestingly enough the mining companies had to be reminded that the mine workers were "one of the most purely British sections of the population" and in that sense one of the most loyal to the government.[7]

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[7] L. Curtis, **With Milner in South Africa**, (London 1951), p. 289.

In spite of the Chamber of Mines' opposition, but not until after much delay, the boundaries of Johannesburg were extended in 1903 to embrace the mines south of the reef line.

By 1901 the concentration of land ownership in the hands of estate companies in Johannesburg had acquired alarming proportions. The Town Council's way of solving the problem of scarcity of land in central areas was the development of a line of electric trams that was going to connect the newly incorporated suburbs in the north and south with the centre of town and the mines. The extension of easy and inexpensive transportation was designed, amongst other reasons, to lower the price of land in the centre of Johannesburg through competition with more economical new areas further out, therefore breaking the spatial stranglehold that had been a consequence of the need for workers to live geographically close to their workplace.[8]

Neither the central administration nor the Town Council were ready to take more drastic measures against the mines' control over the land market to make land and housing available in town. Convinced that markets would sort themselves out when supply caught up with demand, the Town Council only adopted measures of temporary relief for Johannesburg's homeless. But by 1903 the problem was serious enough for Lord Milner to appoint a commission of enquiry[9] to investigate the lack of working class housing. With an eye to more practical solutions, the Finance Committee of the Town Council prepared a Rating Bill that could have changed the political economy of housing slightly.

The introduction to the bill proposed to tax every ownership interest in land belonging to the municipality, excluding mineral rights. By 1903 the interets of the estate companies had created an artificial scarcity of land. High prices of land had two negative effects. On the one hand, it discouraged investment in housing, and on the other hand, it increased rents. Taxing land would have had two advantages in the eyes of the Council. First, it would not act as a deterrent for builders. Second, taxing the land was considered an inducement for the owners to put their land on the market and prevent them from withholding it from beneficial occupation.

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[8] For an analysis of the development of a system of public transport in Johannesburg see, "Johannesburg's Jehus, 1890-1914", in C. van Onselen, **Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914, 1. New Babylon**, (Johannesburg 1982), pp. 163-203.

[9] **Johannesburg Housing Commission, 1903.**

But the Rating Bill was not passed by the Government for it chose to keep the assessment rate as it was in Britain: based on the annual rental value of land and buildings and not on its capital value.[10] The outcome of the discussion of the rating Bill must be seen against the lobbying exercised by the mining industry through its estate companies in defense of its land monopoly.

The third way of dealing with land and property issues chosen by the Town Council was the Vrededorp Stands Ordinance of 1906 which vested the freehold of the government township of Vrededorp in the municipality of Johannesburg.

Under the Republican government destitute *burghers* had been given land rights to stands in Vrededorp. According to the legislation of the time, tenure of these stands was for the life of the original holder and his widow and was only transferable to a lessee belonging to the same social group i.e. poor *burghers*. The Reconstruction administration changed this last clause opening the transference of land rights to any individual. By 1905, of the 785 stands that constituted the township of Vrededorp, 450 were still under the grant of the Republican government, 321 stands had been transferred under the new administration, and 14 were reserved for schools.

In vesting the freehold of Vrededorp in the municipality, the Government was simultaneously giving the Town Council new financial resources and transforming a "temporary and charitable grant" into a normal lease.[11] This was not the first time the new administrators argued against the creation of a "privileged class" amongst the population through state action.[12]In this particular case the charitable grant given by the Republican government had taken the Vrededorp stands off the market and created a group of people that stood apart from the rest of the population because of its access to state charity. In this sense the Vrededorp Stands Ordinance had two functions. On the one hand, through the uniformity of tenure, it returned the stands to the market. On the other hand, it levelled up the rights individuals had to acquire property in this area.

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[10] M. R., Lever, Johannesburg's adoption of site value rating, Honours Dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1993.

[11] Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD), Governor of the Transvaal (GOV) 961/17/109/06.

[12] "Privileged class" in this context refers to a group of people benefitting from government aid. A similar argument was present in the discussion on the permanent housing scheme proposed by the Town Council in 1903. (TAD), Mayor of Johannesburg (MJB) 1/1/4, Minutes of the Town Council, August 1903.

As we have seen Johannesburg's origins as a mining camp largely determined the characteristics of land ownership in the city. Land speculation was born with the goldfields and the legislation governing land acquisition guaranteed the monopoly of estate companies, mainly related to mining capital. In the aftermath of the South African War the Reconstruction administration, due to its close identification with the Randlords interests, did not intervene to any significant extent in the land issue and therefore it did not curb the already high concentration of land in the hands of a few township companies.

3. JOHANNESBURG'S URBANISATION AND THE "GEOGRAPHY OF CLASS", 1900-1906.

In 1899 the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War brought the municipal government as well as most of Johannesburg's economic activity to a standstill. It was only after Lord Robert's occupation of the city in 1901 that local government was re-established.

The new authorities took the state machinery out of the hands of what was seen as a backward inefficient administration and planned to transform it into a modern efficient political structure capable of nurturing economic development based on the mining industry.[13] The Transvaal was to be converted into a British colony and Johannesburg, as the centre of its economic and social life, was a key piece in the grand design of Milner and his team of young Oxford graduated administrators.

In February 1901, after acquainting himself with the state of affairs in Johannesburg, Lionel Curtis sent a memorandum to the Colonial Secretary in which he laid out the lines along which Johannesburg should be reconstructed.

To Curtis, there was no question that Johannesburg should be governed on the model of British municipalities, amongst other reasons because as he expressed in 1901:

> A municipal system approximated to that in England would at once be a school of self-government and mark when the time was ripe to confer its fuller privileges on the

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[13] B. Bozzoli, **The Political Nature of a Ruling Class. Capital and Ideology in South Africa, 1890-1933**, (London 1981), pp. 49-50.

inhabitants of the Colony at large.[14]

Economic and political developments had a decisive impact on the configuration of working class neighbourhoods in Johannesburg and therefore on the processes of urbanisation and settlement of the population Curtis was referring to.

Type, price, and availability of accommodation, proximity to the working place, and provision of services were some of the features that conditioned the characteristics of each neighbourhood in Johannesburg.

Johannesburg central had the largest concentration of buildings and population in the city (Table 1). This neighbourhood was the site of a great number of residential houses that interspersed with shops, banks and offices. The association of residential with commercial buildings in the town centre created the effect of a busy beehive where the bourgeoisie mixed with the popular classes, Boers with British, and whites with blacks.[15]

South of Johannesburg, Marshalltown was the next most important neighbourhood regarding both population and commercial activity. The township comprised 977 stands spread over 67 morgen.[16] In spite of its subsequent commercial development this area managed to keep a more residential character.

Ferreiratown, on the western side of the city opposite the Ferreira mine, constituted an example of the contrary. The area of the township was 19 morgen divided into 289 stands of 50 x 50 and 50 x 100 feet.[17] Ferreiratown started off as a residential area for the middle classes. Soon enough the influx of a very different kind of people transformed this neighbourhood into an area of small and overcrowded houses where local and foreign poor whites and not a few non-europeans eked

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[14] (TAD), Colonial Secretary (CS) 12 3/270-370.

[15] A. Macmillan, **The Golden City**, (London n.d), pp. 118; 157-158.

[16] **Report of the Transvaal Leasehold Townships Commission,** (U. G. 34-1912), pp. 78-80.

[17] **Leasehold Townships....**, p. 70.

out a living through mostly illicit occupations.[18]

In the west end of the city Fordsburg constituted the other typically working class area. With a multiracial population of 1,386 inhabitants in 1890, many poor white families lived there. As there were no restrictions in Fordsburg regarding the use of plots, poor shopkeepers living in rooms behind their shops became a normal feature of this neighbourhood.

Finally, on the easter side of the city, Jeppestown constituted the other important working class neighbourhood. The township had an area of 168 morgen (including Belgravia) divided into 2,709 stands. Restrictions on the utilisation of plots as business premises, put in place by the township owners, had made Jeppestown a more residential area. With a comparably small population, 708 inhabitants in 1890, Jeppe was to become the residence of many mine workers and their families. Although neither overcrowded nor insanitary as a whole, some areas inside the neighbourhood were reported by sanitary inspectors in 1902 and 1903 as a focus of infectious diseases and contaminated water.[19]

Although the mining industry was the single largest employer of white workers, urban growth created the economic space for other industries that employed some of Johannesburg's white population. The distribution of these sources of employment had an important part in the configuration of the working class neighbourhoods. Brewing, brick and tile making, flour milling and baking, carriage and wagon building, harness making, ice making, mineral water manufacturing, and printing were the most important local industries that spread throughout the city.

Each of industries generated related economic activities. By 1896 the brewing industry had to satisfy the customers of 28 liquor stores and 128 bars that employed 438 barmen and 43 barmaids. The flour milling business was shared by 21 millers that provided for 35 bakeries in which 341 bakers were employed. Eight tobacco manufacturers supplied 24 tobacconists in town apart from giving work to 149 cigar and cigarette makers. The printing industry provided jobs for 183 printers, 39 bookmakers, and 38 bookbinders whose work was sold by 11

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[18] W. Scully, **The Ridge of the White Waters**, (London 1912), pp. 207-209; 210-212; 213-214.

[19] (TAD), (MJB) 1/1/3, Minutes of the Town Council, 01/03/02; 28/02/03.

booksellers.

The transport and construction industries were the ones that employed the largest work force in town. Until the establishment of a service of electric trams in 1906, the need for transport in the city kept 96 wagon and carriage builders busy. They built vehicles for private citizens as well as for the 83 cab owners registered in the 1896 census. These vehicles were driven by almost 2,000 drivers while animals and equipment were cared for by 16 farriers, 165 grooms and 43 harness makers. The construction industry created jobs for 1,648 brickmakers, 431 bricklayers, 185 builders and 89 builder contractors, 261 plasterers and some of the 2,203 carpenters that lived in Johannesburg.[20]

The years between 1892 and 1896 saw a boom in construction activity in Johannesburg, and 1895-6 marked the peak of a period of prosperity. As can be seen from Table 2 the Sanitary Board approved almost 2,000 plans per annum during these years. But the five years of prosperity were followed by the 1897-99 depression that continued during the war years.

The shortage of accommodation in Johannesburg, which had been a permanent feature in the history of the city, became particularly acute after the South African War. If in the context of the 1895-98 economic slump the working class complained about the high rents they had to pay,[21] after 1901 the rents were not only higher but the lack of working class accommodation turned into a threat to the settlement policy proposed by the Reconstruction administration.

Establishing the real dimension of the housing crisis in Johannesburg is not an easy task. The number of plans approved by the local authorities between 1890 and 1902 corresponds with the figures given in the report of the **Johannesburg Housing Commission** in 1903. There were by then 17,900 buildings within the Municipal Area, excluding the Kaffir and Coolie locations on the north-west of the city. With a white population of approximately 91,000 the density per building was 5.[22] Even subtracting from the total number of buildings those that were exclusively

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[20] The last two paragraphs are based on the **Johannesburg Census, 1896** and on the **Longland's Johannesburg and District Directory 1896.**

[21] See **Industrial Commission of Enquiry 1897**, especially Mr. R. Barrow evidence pp. 172-174.

[22] **Report of the Johannesburg Housing Commission, 1903,** p. 8.

commercial, the density does not change substantially (5.6). Considering that the average building had two bedrooms, dining-room, kitchen and bathroom, a family with three children would have been moderately comfortable. Compared with cities like London where working class families had to put children in the same bed,[23] or Buenos Aires, where the density per room was 4.44,[24] overcrowding in Johannesburg had not yet reached dramatic proportions. Nevertheless, by 1903 the accommodation of the working classes had become enough of a problem for the government to appoint a commission of enquiry into it. If the figures do not adequately support the complaints and concerns about a serious shortage of accommodation in Johannesburg, there must be other ways of analysing a problem whose existence was confirmed not only by the testimony of most witnesses before the commission of enquiry but also by the many letters to the editor appeared in **The Star** of that year.[25]

The concept of scarcity of housing has to be understood in its historical context. The housing problem in Johannesburg was, as the concerns voiced during the hearings of the **Johannesburg Housing Commission** reflect, economically, socially and politically constituted. At the economic level the shortage of housing was defined in terms of the affordability of the available houses for white breadwinners. From this point of view there were three main components to the housing problem. 1) There were not enough houses available to suit the needs of working class families, i.e. houses with 4 rooms at a rental of 7 to 10 pounds per month.[26] 2) When these houses did exist, rents were unaffordable:

> I heard of an instance (..) in which a foreman carpenter earning 25/ per day [25 pounds per month] was paying 15 pounds a month for a semi detached house of four rooms and

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[23] J. White, **Rosthschild Buildings. Life in an East End Tenement Block 1887-1920**, (London 1980), pp. 33-44.

[24] O. Yujnovsky, Politicas de Vivienda en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1880-1914, **Desarrollo Economico**, 54, 14, 1974, (pp. 327-372), p. 344-345.

[25] See the exchange between "Live and Let Live" and "Desperado" during April of 1902 in **The Star.**

[26] "The asserted scarcity of housing accommodation was based upon facts especially affecting a certain kind of dwelling namely those containing two, three and four rooms, kitchen, pantry and bath. During the past two and a half month I had received applications for at least 110 unfurnished houses of which hardly 10 % were larger than those mentioned whilst the number of houses brought to me for letting purposes stood in no proportion whatsoever to those required" **Johannesburg Housing Commission, 1903,** Evidence Mr. Philip Japhet, estate agent, p. 2.

kitchen on a 50 x 50 stand. [27]

3) Suitable accommodation in terms both of price and size usually existed only beyond walking distance of the city, making transportation an issue and an additional cost. Lack of appropriate transport and the necessity to eat in town instead of at home made these houses unaffordable in terms of a working class family budget (25 pounds per month).[28]

The characteristics of both the land market and the process of settlement in Johannesburg accentuated the economic component of the crisis. On the one hand, the already mentioned high price of the land made it very difficult for a working class family to rent, and much more difficult to buy property. On the other hand, it did not exist in Johannesburg a network of ethnic and neighbourhood solidarity which allowed working class families to create an informal housing market where property was, like in Detroit, owned free of encumbrance and self-built.[29]

Socially, scarcity of housing had its roots in the contradictions between the aspiration to and need for a certain type of accommodation on the one hand, and the fact that this type of accommodation was unaffordable in the desirable neighbourhoods like Marshallstown, Jeppestown or Johannesburg central on the other. Suitable houses were available for rent but only on the borders of the insanitary area. Although this was appropriate accommodation at the right price, the unhealthy conditions and the multiracial component of the area made it thoroughly undesirable for British workers:

> (y)et owing to the high rent in the better parts of the town and suburbs they must necessarily live in those localities affected by the poorer classes and live in such a manner as is repugnant to those who have been used to associate with their equals and take pride

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[27] **Johannesburg Housing....**, Evidence Mr. G. W. Evans, Secretary of the South African Permanent Mutual Building and Investment Society, Third Day Sitting, August 4th 1903 .

[28] "I know that considerable number of people hold stands in Richmond and Melville with the purpose of building as soon as there is a prospect of locomotion but at present they could not get out and in. The class of people who are really interested in this matter want to go home for their midday meal and the result is they crowd in the Braamfontein district." **Johannesburg Housing...**, Evidence, Rev. S.J. Hamilton, para. 557-559.

[29] O. Zunz, **The Changing Face of Inequality. Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920,** (Chicago 1982), pp. 170-171.

on their homes.[30]

Finally, the housing problem was politically constituted in as much as lack of appropriate working class accommodation posed a serious hurdle to the process of settlement of British immigrants:

> To have a contented British population you must have a British family(..) There are thousands of mining fellows here engaged to girls at Home who would gladly get their sweetheart out and settle down, who would be the wives and mothers and thus help in the most material way to achieve Lord Milner's object and make a British South Africa an accomplished fact. So long as the cost of living is so high we cannot get the right class of people to come out.[31]

At the same time, the existence of destitute families of mainly Afrikaner origin who had enjoyed state support during the Republican government, put the new administrators in a position of having to make political decisions in terms of state intervention in the market that might create a "privileged" class of Afrikaners.

The main implications of this situation were spelled out by Rev. S. J. Hamilton, the presbyterian minister of Fordsburg, who had wide experience in working class neighbourhoods:

> Men are finding that it is impossible for them to keep their families and the result is that they are sending them home, in large numbers. Therefore the old evil is being intensified, that is, men instead of making their home here are looking upon this place as one in which make money as speedily as they can and then get out of it. Now this is encouraging the gambling spirit. Our object should be to encourage family life. As it is Johannesburg is threatened with remaining a mining camp instead of being a settled community.[32]

In less than two decades the urbanisation of Johannesburg had produced all the evils of fast developed capitalist cities: the working class was separated from the well-to-do by lack of transport,[33] high cost of living and scarcity of affordable accommodation. Slums such as those

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[30] **Johannesburg Housing...**, para. 1.

[31] **Johannesburg Housing...**, Evidence Rev. S. J. Hamilton, Second Day of Sitting, 31st July 1903.

[32] **Johannesburg Housing Commission**, 1903, Rev. S. J. Hamilton's evidence, 31 July 1903,

[33] Stedman-Jones pointed out the same problems in the case of the London working class. G. Stedman-Jones, **Outcast London. A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian England,**

in the Brickfields-Burghersdorp area were associated in the mind of the ruling classes with London's rookeries.[34] Milner's plans to make the Transvaal predominantly British through the immigration of the right kind of working men was undermined by successive economic crises and, not less important, the ravages of silicosis amongst British miners.[35] The development of working class neighbourhoods seemed to be accentuating the unstable character of workers and conspiring in a serious way against the grand political design of the Reconstruction administration.

4. SOCIAL ENGINEERING AND THE "GEOGRAPHY OF CLASS" IN JOHANNESBURG.

The British administration of the Transvaal was especially sensitive to the extent to which social problems could undermine the political and ideological control of capital. The appointment of the **Insanitary Commission of Enquiry, 1902-03** and of the **Johannesburg Housing Commission, 1903**, and the creation, in the same year, of the Transvaal Immigration Department with its goal of encouraging women immigration were of crucial significance. As Charles van Onselen has pointed out they were "designed to help stabilise the Rand's skilled white proletariat, secure British hegemony and facilitate social control by separating the labouring classes from the dangerous classes".[36] What remains to be seen is the manner and extent in which this was effectively done in Johannesburg.

(Oxford 1971), pp. 217-218. O. Yujnovski, Politicas de vivienda en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1880-1914, **Desarrollo Economico.....**; P. Liermur, Buenos Aires: La Estrategia de la Casa Autoconstruida, in, Clacso, **Sectores Populares y Vida Urbana,** (Buenos Aires 1984).

[34] A letter from the Commissioner of Police of Johannesburg to the Town Clerk written in February 1902 gives a good idea of the fears that these areas arose: (..) I beg to inform you that I visited the location known as the Brickfields and Indian Location yesterday in company with the Health Officer. These places are not laid in any kind of order, and it is quite impossible to make any kind of arrangement for keeping a watch on the low class of people living in the place, or for an effective guard over the property of people living in the town. The place is full of narrow passages, in some places not two feet wide, running irregularly at all angles and communicating numerous sheds and outhouses, which themselves are thoroughfares for those who wish to use them as such. It would be impossible to maintain any watch on such places and a criminal once getting into the place would almost certainly escape and be practically free from successful pursuit. Signed E. Showers.

[35] E. Katz, **The White Death. Silicosis on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines, 1886-1910,** (Johannesburg 1995), pp. 93-121.

[36] C. van Onselen, **Studies in Social and Economic..., 1. New Babylon**, p. 28.

Transforming the Transvaal into a British colony under the dominance of industrial capital implied, from the municipal government perspective, more than sound finances. In Johannesburg, as in other colonial cities, it was necessary to address the problems of urban development in a fast-growing city. Urban transport, street clearance and lack of working class accommodation were amongst the most important issues before both the appointed Town Council (1901-1903) and the elective body that succeeded it (1903-1906).

The forms of state intervention in these areas were shaped by a mixture of social engineering and *laissez-faire* that responded to prevalent conceptions of town planning and to the ruling classes' perception of white workers.

Against the backdrop of Social Darwinism[37] the sanitation movement had remarkable strength in inspiring town planning in most western capitalist cities. In South Africa the "sanitation syndrome" was also in line with these views.

The belief in the environmental determination of crime - so pervasive in Britain during the mid 1800s - also influenced the resolutions of the Town Council in town planning. Street clearance was devised to put slum areas in contact with better neighbourhoods in the hope that better communication and circulation of air would help fighting moral decadence as well as unhealthy conditions in the poverty stricken areas of the city.

The domain of public health was an area in which colonial state intervention between 1901 and 1906 was at once subtle and intrusive. The appointment in 1901 of Charles Porter as Johannesburg's Medical Officer of Health heralded a whole new approach to urban social problems.

The annual reports of the Medical Officer of Health show the importance of medical involvement in quantifying, controlling and educating Johannesburg's population. Statistics on birth and death, as well as causes of mortality by racial group in each ward were carefully gathered. Disease, birth and death were correlated with general sanitary conditions or lack thereof in each

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[37] S. Dubow, Race, Civilisation and Culture. The Elaboration of Segregationist Discourse in the Inter-War Years, in, S. Marks and S. Trapido, **(eds), The Politics of Race and Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa**, (London 1987), pp. 71-94.

district and explained against its social background.[38] In this sense, ideas in Johannesburg were not that different from the British or Argentinean approach to the matter: crime, disease and immorality were seen as a consequence of the insanitary and crowded conditions of poor neighbourhoods which in turn constituted a menace to the whole society.[39]

The second area of state intervention in urban problems was slum clearance. Slum conditions were prevalent in certain areas of Johannesburg from its very beginnings. The continuous influx of population, the hardships of the war and cyclical economic crises had worsened the already unsatisfactory state of affairs. Eradicating slums from Johannesburg was a social as well as a political necessity that the Reconstruction Town Council took very seriously.

Sue Parnell has demonstrated how apparently non-racial regulations relating to overcrowding or slum removals introduced in the 1910s were part of an emerging racial framework of urban government in South African cities.[40] It is argued here that this trend appeared in Johannesburg immediately after the South Africa War and became more evident during the hearings of the **Insanitary Area Commission of Enquiry** of 1903. The Town Council's plea to demolish dilapidated and insanitary houses, to separate Natives, Coolies and Malays from the white population was a consequence of what M. Swanson has dubbed sanitation syndrome in the case of Cape Province.[41]

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[38] (TAD), (MJB) 5/1, Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the Period from 31st July 1902 to 30th June 1903; Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the Period from 31st July 1905 to 30th June 1906.

[39] G. Stedman-Jones, **Outcast London. A Study in the Relationship between Classes in the Victorian Society,** pp. 191-193. In Buenos Aires Eduardo Wilde who would be Minister of Home Affairs explained in 1883 referring to the houses of the poor that "Each poor that lives badly is a menace to his fellow men", E. Wilde, El conventillo y sus caracteristicas, Curso de Higiene Publica, **Obras Completas**, vol. III, (Buenos Aires 1914), p. 30. (My translation).

[40] S. Parnell, Creating Racial Privilege. The Origins of South African Public Health and Town Planning Legislation, **Journal of Southern African Studies,** 19, 3, (1993), pp. 471-488.

[41] M. Swanson, The Sanitation Syndrome. Bubonic Plague and Urban native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909, **Journal of African History,** XVIII, 3 (1977), pp. 387-410. See also, V. Bickford-Smith, **Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town. Group Identity and Social Practice, 1875-1902,** (Cambridge 1995).

Johannesburg's largest slum was Brickfields-Burghersdorp. It included the Malay and Coolie Locations and a section of the neighbourhood of Fordsburg. This area was separated from Johannesburg proper by the railway line north of Braamfontein. Its origins can be traced to late 1887 when the Republican government agreed to let poor *burghers* use the clay deposits located on the south west bank of the spruit that ran through the Braamfontein farm to make bricks. Soon the more or less temporary refuge for dispossessed country people, characterised by overcrowded and marshy conditions, became a permanent feature in the social geography of Johannesburg. By 1896 the census registered a multiracial population of 7,000 in Brickfields. From 1897 onwards this area was known as Burghersdorp and was populated by the poorest of the former *bywoners* arriving in the city. When, in 1901, an epidemic of bubonic plague broke out in the coastal cities, this area became an urgent target in order to prevent returning refugees from introducing the disease to the city. In Johannesburg, as in Cape Town and in Buenos Aires, though in this case in a non racist context,[42] it was an epidemic that prompted municipal action and a more forceful intervention of health officers.

It took three years until a commission of enquiry was appointed to deal with the improvement scheme suggested by the municipality. The Town Council's project proposed the expropriation of several stands in order to make the area sanitary and to open a thoroughfare to link eastern and western parts of the city as a step towards the establishment of a tramway service.

But expropriation had to be offset by a rehousing scheme. The Town Council proposed to build 180 three-roomed houses, 150 two-roomed and 150 one-roomed houses as an alternative for the 1,811 whites living in the slum. These houses, built on government ground, would be rented at 3:0:0; 2:5:0; and 1:10:0 pounds per month respectively. It was acknowledged that:

> the rents proposed are in excess of the means of the class to be dealt with. This is not important; in such cases the evicted occupants usually go to some place but little better, and the buildings provided for them are taken by a more prosperous class of people. But obviously, the nett result is that those affected by these changes move into houses better than they occupied before.[43]

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[42] In Buenos Aires it was the yellow fever epidemic of 1871 that prompted the imposition of sanitary control in working class tenements.

[43] (TAD), (MJB) 1/4/3.

The entire proposal was conceived of along the lines of the English Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1889 and presented the exact-same problems. It dismissed the problem that most evicted families could not afford the new accommodation provided, and it worked on the assumption that moving people out of dilapidated homes would not mean an exacerbation of the crisis. In Johannesburg, as years before in London and Buenos Aires,[44] this approach showed how short-sighted administrators could be. The rehousing scheme was not designed to satisfy the needs of those who would be evicted and thus, instead of solving the problem, it would accentuate it.

As it was, the potential problems of the proposed rehousing scheme remained theoretical, since the Town Council only implemented part of it. The Town Council went ahead with the expropriation but it never built any of the alternative housing it had proposed under the original scheme. The high cost incurred as a result of the expropriation became a serious deterrent to more decisive state intervention in the housing problem. Nevertheless, this was only one reason for the Town Council not to embark on a permanent housing scheme. During the hearings of the 1903 **Johannesburg Housing Commission**, the subject was again brought up.

The proposed scheme would have implied renting houses below their market value and it was maintained that:

> To provide for a limited number of persons (...) at a rent below the market rate would mean the creation of a favoured class, housed by employment of public credit on principles not strictly commercial. The idea is not one that should be even contemplated, and the alternative is to let the houses at their fair market value.[45]

In addition, the Town Council saw the number of plans passed by the municipality in 1903 as a sign of the recovery of the housing market. In this context, the Council came out against intervening in the market.

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[44] Towards the end of the 1880s the Municipality of Buenos Aires developed a plan to build working class houses that failed dismally precisely because the rent of the new houses was unaffordable by the lower rank of the working class. S. Gaches, **Les Lougements Ouvriers a Buenos Aires**, (Paris 1899).

[45] (TAD), (MJB) 1/1/4, Minutes of the Town Council, August 1903.

Finally, it was argued, scarcity of housing in Johannesburg was not, like in other great cities, due to the lack of land suitable for building. High rents in this city, where "the land available is practically unlimited", was the consequence of a temporary shortage of houses. The solution to the problem lay in attracting capital to the building trades. This, together with the development of cheap public transport, would eventually open new areas for building and ease the pressure for accommodation in the centre of the city.

The view of the Johannesburg Town Council was not isolated from the ideas on the matter prevalent in Europe in the late nineteenth century. The conclusions of the I International Conference on Cheap Housing, held in Paris in 1899, had established that the state should not be involved directly in the construction of working class accommodation competing with the private sector. The role of the state was to develop transport services and control the sanitary conditions of these places, but not one of intervention in the market.

5. CONCLUSION

The change from a liberal approach towards working class housing, with its faith in the fairness of the market left to itself, to a more social approach, characterised by active state intervention into social problems, so well documented for London by Stedman Jones,[46] only briefly emerged in ruling class ideology during the Reconstruction period.

The Gold Law has hastened the speculative nature of land ownership in Johannesburg and opened the way to high concentration of urban land in the hands of a few estate companies related to the mining houses. The economic and political importance of gold production for the Transvaal and the Empire, prevented the Reconstruction administration to take the land issue any further than including the mines within the extended municipal boundaries. And this, as shown in section 2, was done to include British mineworkers as voters and not to challenge the mine houses' monopoly over land ownership. Coherent with this approach the report of the **Johannesburg Housing Commission** showed that the state was not prepared to intervene in the housing problem beyond some relief measures.

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[46] G. Stedman-Jones, **Outcast London. A Study in the Relationships between Classes in the Victorian Society**, (Oxford 1971).

The main goal of the Reconstruction administration was to guarantee the political and ideological continuity of the British Empire, securing at the same time the ideological dominance of capitalism. The continuity of the Empire was to be achieved through a British demographic majority. Securing the ideological dominance of capitalism involved a combination of forceful social engineering and liberalism.

The greatest challenge to the reconstruction administration was to mould Britons and Boers into a single identity which was defined in the political terms of citizenship. Curtis's idea that the municipal system was a school of self government, as we saw in section 3, is of vital importance to understand the administrative decisions of the time. But also certain aspects of state intervention were directed towards this: the characteristics of the Vrededorp Stands Ordinance and the recommendations of the **Insanitary Area Commission of Enquiry** are two cases in point.

It was demonstrated in section 4 that the social problems generated by urban growth were addressed by the local government in terms of development of infrastructure; creation of a system of rates and taxes; the attempt to unify land tenure in the city; and the implementation of sanitary legislation. The liberal credo with its faith in market forces was far stronger in the Colony than in Britain and prevented administrators both from organising state charity and from intervening in society in a more direct and decisive manner. Their resistance to creating a class in society privileged by access to public credit was the justification for the absence of state agency in the housing problem. State intervention in social problems was not seen as furthering the homogenisation of society. On the contrary, it established a clear separation between those who qualified for state assistance and those who did not. This was a particularly thorny issue[47] when most state assistance would have had to be directed to the Afrikaner section of the working class, as the most clearly underprivileged group. By 1905 the Reconstruction administration had not "discovered" the poor white problem, and the white working class had not yet shown many signs of militant energy. Before the 1906-08 economic depression it was simpler to believe that market forces will work.

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[47] The official attitude was conditioned perhaps also by a reluctance to privilege precisely those people (Afrikaners) whose interests, unlike those of the British immigrants, the British administration did not have close to its heart.

In the Reconstruction period social engineering was unsuccessful because it worked almost exclusively at the ideological and political level without addressing the actual problems of the white working class. The geography of class of Johannesburg was a product of indirect state intervention and often of its absence.

Ironically, the lack of state intervention created a peculiar urban space of class divisions in which working class neighbourhoods developed separately from other areas of the city. Social and economic distance, as well as the specific function these areas had within the urban economy, created white working class neighbourhoods in which a powerful working class identity and consciousness were to be forged in a later period.

TABLE I
NUMBER AND TYPE OF BUILDINGS, 1890*

NEIGHBOURHOOD	BUILDINGS	SHOPS	HOTEL-BARS	POPULATION
JOHANNESBURG	2118	486	146	8337
BRAAMFONTEIN	182	15	2	124
FORDSBURG	384	47	8	1384
JEPPESTOWN	168	11	4	708
MARSHALLTOWN	699	119	52	2432
FERREIRATOWN	460	39	34	2263

*SOURCE: Census 1890 quoted in Johannesburg Census 1896.

TABLE II
NUMBER OF BUILDINGS ERECTED IN JOHANNESBURG, 1894-1904*

YEAR	NUMBER OF NEW BUILDINGS
1894	1,236
1895	2,538
1896	1,491
1897	1,058
1898	444
1899	600
1900	----
1901	79
1902	1,072
1903	3,000
1904	7,883

* SOURCE: Annual Reports of the Department of Works of the Sanitary Board, Town Council and Reconstruction Town Council.