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Eales, Kathy

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Title: Rehabilitating the Body Politic: Black Women, Sexuality and the Social Order in Johannesburg, 1924-1937.

by: Kathy Eales

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This paper is premised on an empirical study of administrative policies towards black women on the Rand in the 1920s and Thirties, presented as 'Popular Representations of Black Women on the Rand and their Impact on the Development of Influx Controls, 1924-1937' at the 1990 History Workshop Conference. Unless otherwise specified, the assertions made here are derived directly from that paper. The purpose of this paper is to develop a new analysis of the empirical material contained in the History Workshop paper.
I am indebted to Debbie Posel for her criticisms of my History Workshop paper, and grateful to the Human Sciences Research for its financial support.

In a number of valuable studies, Deborah Gaitskell has explored the discrete worlds of white female missionaries and newly-urbanised black women in Johannesburg before the Second World War. In one seminal article, 'Housewives, Maids or Mothers: some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg, 1903-1939'[1], she explores the contradictions inherent in WASP missionary attempts to win acceptance for a particular Christian family model - 'male breadwinner, dependent housekeeping wife and mother, dependent school-going children' - among black women. As she demonstrates, this model could never be more than a remote ideal as long as poverty required most women to work outside the home.[2] She argues, however, that these efforts were endorsed by 'Johannesburg lobbies for missionaries and urban manufacturers' - broadly speaking, liberal capital -

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1 (1983) 24 *Journal of African History*, pp241-256.
2 Ibid, p252.

who supported improved wages for urban workers, a more skilled and settled urban workforce, and a more contented, better paid, less politically volatile black urban workforce. Opposing this, she contends, were the representatives of government, municipal officials and the advisory committee of experts on native affairs, the Native Affairs Commission, who wished to keep the costs of reproducing the labour force to a minimum and ground its reproduction in the rural areas. In this model, influx control was essential.[3] Effectively, Gaitskell sets up an opposition between calls for greater urban familial stability and improved conditions of family life, on the one hand, and for cheap reproduction of labour and influx control, on the other.

Without wishing to impugn the rest of this valuable article, this particular formulation is problemmatic at a number of levels. There was no necessary opposition between calls for influx control and the fostering of a stable urban working class; influx controls, as Hindson and others have demonstrated, provided one means by which a limited stable urban working class could be nurtured through excluding those deemed surplus. Secondly, state policy is rarely as coherent as that reflected in departmental or commision reports. It is debateable whether

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3 Ibid., pp252-4.

the Fusion government, in particular, followed any one model of native administration consistently, especially where questions of 'the family' were concerned. By the same token, 'urban manufacturers' and liberal capital in general rarely recognised their best interests so clearly, let alone acted on them. Thirdly, Gaitskell conflates the interests of municipal and central government officials; the degree of reciprocal tension between central state officials and local authorities has been demonstrated convincingly in a number of recent local studies. Fourthly, it is unwise to exclude municipal authorities from the attempts of social reformers to foster a cult of domesticity among black women and rehabilitate urban african families. Graham Ballenden, manager of Johannesburg's municipal native affairs department throughout the Thirties, established a native welfare department within the municipal NAD in 1937 and sanctioned strenuous efforts to enscribe black women in precisely the same values as those propagated by Christian missionaries. (He was also an ardent supporter of rigorous influx controls, higher wages for non-migrant workers, and greater autonomy for local authorities from central state control.)

There is, however, a further dimension to Gaitskell's treatment of missionary attempts to educate black women about their 'proper' role in 'the family'. She writes:

> 'domesticity was much more part of the missionary instruction of African women converts than any corresponding stress on

fatherhood and home-responsibilities in priestly training of Christian males. For urban black females in early industrial South Africa, Christianity was as much about a specific family form, of which they were the linchpin, as about a new faith in Christ.'

This formulation begs the question - why were 'domesticity' and veneration for 'a specific family form' among black women on the Rand deemed so important among a wide range of interests, particularly in the 1920s and Thirties?

The proposition put forward in this paper is that concern for black women's morality and, more generally, efforts to shore up cracks in the institution of 'the family', reflected anxiety - notably among government officials - over the constitution of the social order in a context of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. In this reading, the initiatives described by Gaitskell are one manifestation of a broad-ranging anxiety - rather than a quaint, if misguided, initiative inspired by post-Victorian evangelism. It is not insignificant that the 'specific family form' endorsed by Gaitskell's missionaries was strongly identified with a model in which women were dependent, obedient and submissive, and in which they accepted unquestioningly a pre-ordained hierarchy; their sexuality, moreoever, was channeled into a monogamous relationships with men, and devolved largely upon procreation. Metaphorically,

too, orderly family units were deemed the essential prerequiste for orderly society. As Johannesburg's first social welfare officer in the municipal Native Affairs Department put it, 'psychologically no less than biologically the family is the vital nucleus of society. ... Citizenship literally begins at home.'[4] Secondly, this paper suggests that there was no necessary opposition between efforts to bolster urban black family life and the institution of influx controls. Assertions of women's subordination and the rehabiliation of male authority facilitated tighter regulation of women's conduct; in this reading, one may argue that formal documentary influx controls for women in the Thirties were an extreme and inappropriate expedient.

Speaking of nineteenth century Britain, Jeffrey Weeks has described

> 'a grappling for control' in the light of rapidly changing social and economic conditions. All these produced major shifts in relations between the genders, and in the relationship between behaviour and moral codes. Sexuality becomes a symbolic battleground both because it was the focus

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4 Miriam Janisch, *Should Bantu Marriages be Registered?* Johannesburg, 1942, pi.

of many of these changes, and because it was a surrogate medium through which other intractable battles could be fought.'[5]

The same may be said of South Africa in the Twenties and Thirties - a period of industrial development, urban settlement, then economic depression, followed by even more rapid development and new settlement. In particular, 'the native question' - particularly as it played itself out in the country's urban areas - was reduced in some respects to one of morality, in which black women played the dominant vitiating role. (As Ray Phillips pointed out in 1930, 'the heart of the native question is *the heart of the native.*[6]) Worries over overcrowding, the growth of slums and the acute shortage of black housing might be lanced through initiatives to exclude black women from the cities 'for their own protection'. Concern over vice and crime could be allayed through campaigns to rid the towns of female liquor sellers. Fears of miscegenation and eugenic disaster could be allayed through moralising campaigns against prostitution and the forcible eviction of scores of black women from the towns. Indeed, one sees the rise of a veritable social purity

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5 Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, myths and modern sexualities*, London, 1985, p74.

6 Ray Phillips, *The Bantu are Coming: Phases of South Africa's Race Problem*, London, 1930, p85. Emphasis in original.

consensus in which perverse black women were scapegoated for a multitude of urban ills.

Black female settlement in white-designated areas was blamed for an extraordinarily broad range of urban malaises, ranging from crime, through abuse of liquor, the spread of slums, rising juvenile delinquency, to the spread of venereal diseases. 'The natives of this country,' declared General Smuts at a United Party Congress in 1937, 'are becoming rotten with disease, and a menace to civilisation.'[7] Contemporary social values depicted VD as uniquely sinful, as visible evidence of moral decay. According to Louis Freed, a prominent Johannesburg medical doctor and social commentator, prostitutes were the principal disseminators of the disease.[8] This assignment of responsibility to women was indicative of a pervasive belief that women's sexuality should be held in check. Contemporary European thinking depicted women's sexuality as innately problemmatic and anomalous; men's was not. While men's sexuality was apparently an uncontroversial natural force, women's, on the other hand, was both inert, until awakened by a man, and independently vora-

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7 Quoted in L F Freed, *The Social Aspect of Venereal Disease: An Address to the Equal Moral Standards Conference of the Johannesburg Branch of the National Council of Women*, Johannesburg, 1939, p15.

8 Ibid., p16.

cious and demanding.[9] It was both an absence and excess. In relation to it, men were both omnipotent, and vulnerable. Underlying public panic over the prevalence of VD, then, was panic over unconstrained female sexuality. Moreover, returning to Weeks' formulation of symbolic battlegrounds, alarm over the spread of venereal disease amounted, quite literally, to fear for the health of the body politic.

Extending the use of the notion of moral panics, Stuart Hall has argued that

> the 'moral panic' appears to us to be one of the principal forms of ideological consciousness by means of which a 'silent majority' is won over to the support of increasingly coercive measures on the part of the state, and lends its legitimacy to a 'more than usual' exercise of control.[10]

Thus one may expect to see evidence of more repressive controls exerted on black urban women at this time. And, indeed, legislation in the late Twenties and Thirties did provide for 'increasingly coercive measures' to regulate black women living in white-designated areas.[11] By 1937, when the Native Laws

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9 Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England, 1880-1939*, Oxford 1989, pp157-74.

10 Quoted by Simon Watney in *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the media*, London, 1987, p40.

11 Phil Bonner's descriptions of the violent responses of Ma Rashea gangs towards certain women on the East Rand underlines the fact that this response was not limited to the white state. see 'Desirable or Undesirable Sotho Women? Liquor, Prostitution and the Migration of Sotho Women to the Rand, 1920-1945', unpublished seminar paper, 1988, p37.

Amendment Act was passed, local authorities had been granted far-ranging powers. Control over the influx of women was permitted through a system of certificates of permission issued by a combination of rural and urban officials; without this, a black woman could be excluded or deported from a proclaimed area. Measures to regulate the conduct of women already in town were now buttressed with mechanisms facilitating the imprisonment or deportation of 'the undesirable' under a number of guises - as illegal aliens, as prostitutes, as beer sellers or liquor brewers, or as simply 'idle and undesirable'.

Significantly, though, the essential mechanism - regulated influx control by means of permissive - was not implemented on the Rand, nor, as far as I am aware, in any other part of the country. Rather, local authorities relied on specific punitive measures against those deemed 'undesirable'.

In a recent paper[12] I argued that the reason influx controls for women were not exploited lay in contemporary representations of women, which were fundamentally dualist; women were both blessed

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12 'Popular Representations of Black Women on the Rand and their Impact on the Development of Influx Controls, 1924-1937', unpublished History Workshop paper, 1990.

and virtuous, and debased and whores. This dualism, I argued, helps explain, at least in part, the ongoing reluctance of officials of the white state to include black women in the pass controls; officials and policy makers were immobilised by the contradictions of their own beliefs. This model is premised on Roman Jacobsen's notion of binary opposition, which has its origins in a structuralist approach to linguistics. Useful though it is in highlighting the extent to which contemporary representations of women were polarised, its application is limited. It is a static model, able neither to accommodate nor explain change. Frozen in time, the unused clauses of the 1937 Natives Laws Amendment Act may be explained; more opaque are the factors which *permitted* the implementation of women's passes in the Fifties.

One way out of this impasse is to return to the first principles of a theory of ideology.[13] In simple terms, an ideology may be described as constitutive of reality in a way which seeks to legitimate various forms of subordination. A key measure of its success is the extent to which it is able to accommodate crises and contradictions; it must be seen to make sense and retain coherence and consistency. The dualism described above is im-

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13 I am indebted to Debbie Posel for her arguments here.

mediately discernable as a contradiction. Women were described both as good mothers or whores. Yet those representations were an integral part of an ideology which succeeded in its broader legimitimating objective precisely because it was able to resolve this contradictory position. Re-insert men as the inarticulate premise of this formulation, and the contradiction is resolved. A woman with a 'respectable' relationship to a man, or men, qualified as a decent loving mother / chaste wife / pure virgin; if her relationship was 'unrespectable', she was deemed a whore.

This approach is vindicated when applied to urban native administration on the Reef in the Thirties. Indeed, there is extensive evidence that the means by which state and municipal authorities sought to regulate the presence and conduct of black women in Johannesburg in this period was through rehabilitating men's authority over women. The institution of *lobola* was given an unprecedented boost in status both by the 1927 Natives Administration Act and in the report of the Native Economic Commission, where Holloway argued that the rehabilitation of lobola as an institution - and a singularly patriarchal one at that - would check the degeneration of morals and traditional authority structures.[14] More specifically, stronger assertions of women's

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14 Report of the Native Economic Commission, pp102-5, paras 704-19.

traditional role might check their exodus from the rural areas. From 1930, the law provided that women's entry into urban areas required the sanction of their guardians, and access to authorised accommodation was made largely contingent on their relationship to a qualified male relative. These provisions were extended in the 1937 Native Laws Amendment Act.

Municipal officials had a very clear sense of what was required to improve control over errant women. The precise syntax of order was summarised in the neat formulation 'one man, one wife, one house', coined by municipal officials in 1938.[15] In a recent interview, Will Carr, one of Ballenden's deputies in the 1930s and subsequently manager of Non-European Affairs Department, described the department's approach in the Thirties:

> The problem was threefold. One was employment: to get these women employed, other than just running shebeens. Secondly, to get them decently housed. That was very difficult indeed. The third problem was probably the most difficult - to get them part of a stable family unit. To get them to lead decent lives. It was impossible to draw a line between these three. They were all so intertwined.[16]

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15 Wits AD 843 B56.4, 'Conference on Native Juvenile Delinquency', address by Ballenden, quoting Mrs H Henderson.

16 Interview with Will Carr, Johannesburg, 9 January 1989.

The unmistakeable inference of all three propositions was that single women, living independently, tended towards immorality. Housed by the municipality, employed and married, on the other hand, their conduct was more readily amenable to regulation by established male authority - particularly as few women qualified for municipal housing in their own right; houses were allocated primarily to men with families.

In this formulation, then, it is not coincedental that the major female targets of state harassment in the Thirties were precisely those women who were not readily amenable to conventional male authority - independent liquor brewers, prostitutes, and others who remained single for a number of reasons by choice. In other words, those whom state officials targetted for deportation or confinement were those who had rejected many of the conventions of the prevailing patriarchy; that patriarchy, in turn, refused them its protection.

In this manner, black men were effectively recruited as allies of the state in its efforts to assert control over women in urban areas. Nor were the majority reluctant; a variety of sources underline the extent to which many African men abhorred the growing assertiveness of African women.[17] Perhaps one can

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17 'I wish to write and tell all men about modern wives. They are all bad, but the worst are those who live in towns. Their actions are disgraceful, so is their speech.
Forget that 'wives must honour and obey'. But does stubborness make them happy? No. The only royal road to happiness in any home is mutual understanding between man and wife and man with a willful wife

even propose that this tenuous and unstated alliance played a role in tempering the state's enthusiasm for passes for women. Commenting on the major influx of women to the Rand in the mid- to late Thirties, the Chief Native Commissioner of the Witwatersrand underlined the need for pass controls for women:

> 'While their presence may and does act, in some measure, as a safety valve, there can be no question that the uncontrolled prostitution, coupled with the traffic in liquor, constitute a grave social problem and are the direct causes of considerable lawlessness. [Yet it] ... would require close study and delicate handling to avoid unpleasant repercussions, as Natives of all grades of society and shades of opinion would bitterly resent the application of the pass laws to their women.'[18]

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is to be pitied indeed.
My only advice to all my friends is that they must not marry town girls.'

E B Rakgomo, letter to the editor of *Bantu World*, 23.3.1935.

This was not an isolated view. At a meeting with municipal NAD officials in February 1942, the body of 3 000 Orlando residents requested the department to include the following in the new schedule of location regulations:

> 'If a woman is found using obscene language in the streets or misbehaving herself in public, she shall be reported to the committee who, on finding her guilty, will recommend that she be transferred from her house.'

Transvaal Intermediate Archives, Johannesburg, WRAB 210/1, 'Minutes of a meeting of Municipal Native Affairs Department Officials with Orlando Residents', 17.2.1942.

18 NTS 166/33 Chief Native Commissioner to the Director of Native Labour, Witwatersrand, 27.6.1939.

There is no suggestion here that women might resent influx controls; this was an arrangement between men, and one best shelved for the present.

Elsewhere I have argued that the state was far from clear about the answer to the native question by the end of the Thirties, despite increasingly determined attempts to formulate a viable response.[19] Given this uncertainty - and the inadequacy of the existing bureaucratic infrastructure - perhaps one can conclude that the reason there were no pass or influx controls for women was simply because the state was not fully convinced of their merits, and believed that their disadvantages - at a *political* level, as viewed by African *men* - far outweighed any material or administrative advantage. In this reading, formal influx controls for women, based on pass laws and documentation, were an extreme remedy, to be utilised only once more traditional sanctions had broken down, or when the scale of widespread female settlement was perceived to leave no alternative. This stage was not reached before World War II. Instead, the state sought to consolidate its administrative structures through encouraging the rehabilitation of traditional authority structures expedient to its purposes. For, as Albie Sachs noted in a recent paper,

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19 See 'Popular Representations of Black Women on the Rand', pp15-17.

'it is a sad fact that one of the few profoundly non-racial institutions in South Africa is patriarchy.'[20]

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20 Albie Sachs, 'Judges and Gender: The Constitutional Rights of Women in a Post-Apartheid South Africa' unpublished discussion paper, 1990, p1.