

BOOK REVIEWS – REVUE DES LIVRES

South Africa – A Model Capitalist State ?

David Yudelman: *The Emergence of Modern South Africa – State, Capital, and the Incorporation of Organized Labour on the South African Gold Fields, 1902–1939*, Greenwood Press.

Dan O'Meara: *Volkskapitalisme – Class, capital and ideology in the development of Afrikaner nationalism, 1934–1948*. Cambridge University Press and Ravan Press.

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Apartheid is rapidly decaying and visions of a new democratic South Africa are once again appearing on the political horizon. In such times of crisis in the life of a society the historical myths which sustained the old order are usually swept aside by new «liberating» interpretations of the past.

While Marxism is on the wane in Europe today, in South Africa leftist ideas are setting fire to the minds of some white and an increasing number of black students and lecturers at the English universities. Until the middle of the 1970s a liberal version of the history of South Africa dominated the English-speaking universities and a nationalist version the Afrikaans-speaking universities ones. The renaissance in Marxist thought in post-1968 Europe and Latin America captured the minds of young white South African scholars studying abroad. The current diffusion of ideas is reminiscent of the inter-war period when young Afrikaner academics studying in Europe were deeply influenced by fascist ideology.

The decisive feature of the political economy of apartheid is that black labour is directly under the control of the state, rather than the market. An eminent liberal economist, Ralph Horwitz, described this exercise of bureaucratic authority over the utilization of African labour as «the most extraordinary legislative immobilization of a labour market known to economic history». In a recent article intended for a sober bourgeois audience he commented that:

No doubt the reader will regard it as non-academic hyperbole and most white South Africans as «Marixst propaganda». It is literally accurate, however, that the ultimate minutiae of this combined industrial-urban areas legislation gives such bureaucratic discretion over the labour market that no black African has a legal right to choose for whom he works, what he works at or where he works in the whole sovereign territory of the Republic of South Africa – except with a bureaucrat's imprimatur.

Liberal and Marxist social scientists do not contest this reality of apartheid, rather it is the explanation of the origins and determinants of the system which sharply divides old-time liberals from neo-Marxists. Some liberals tend to explain apartheid as a product of Afrikaner nationalism's

enforcement of its claim to self-determination. Others explain apartheid as simply the result of an unchanging irrational factor – white racism which is assumed to be dysfunctional to the capitalist system. Marxists argue that racism and national consciousness are not static phenomena in South African history, and hence, they are themselves in need of an explanation which takes into account materialistic, as well as idealistic forces. The apartheid policy is shown to be highly functional to capital accumulation. Class struggle is considered to have been the motor-force of South African society from 1652 to the present day.

Yudelman contends that the racial factor has blinded observers to the way South Africa fits into an international comparative perspective. «South Africa exhibits in almost caricatured form the ugly face of most developing industrial states. The concentration of a disproportionate amount of growing wealth in the hands of a minority, the decline in civil and human rights, the centralization of power, and the systematic exploitation of the powerless». Rather than being a deviant society outside the normal process of capitalist industrialization, the history of the relationship between mining capital and the modern South African state reveals that in many ways South Africa was a precursor and a model of development in the advanced industrial societies. Since the first decade of this century the gold mining industry, which has always been the backbone of the economy, has been «married» to the young state. Yudelman vividly illustrates his central theme with a quote from Henry Fielding's Jonathan Wild:

he in a few minutes ravished this fair creature, or at least would have ravished her, if she had not, by a timely compliance, prevented him.

This study of the way an alliance of state and capital subjugated co-opted organized (white) labour in the early decades of this century is meant as a lesson for the 1980s when the most crucial problem shared by the South African state and big business is how to defuse the revolutionary potential of the black workforce. Until the 1970s, Gold mining had been an extremely cost sensitive industry because the price of gold was fixed by forces outside the control of the producers. When faced with by periodical cost crises in the first decades of the century, the mine owners did everything in their power to lower costs. Between 1904 to 1907 they went as far as importing 50,000 indentured Chinese labourers (with the backing of government) which helped them break the resistance of the white trade unions and enabled them to lower black wages in a period of labour shortage. At other times they tried to save on wages by increasing the number of cheap black workers supervised by white (mainly Afrikaner) overseers. Yudelman shows that in most of the confrontations between capital and white labour the state intervened on the side of capital in order to protect «the goose that laid the golden egg». After the Rand Rebellion in 1922, in which the Smuts government had used a force of 20,000 men supported by aircraft, artillery tanks to defeat 10,000 rebels at a cost of 250 lives, a bill for the formal co-option of organized labour was drawn up. The white

workers surrendered their effective right to strike and in return for institutionalized collective bargaining. Today a similar struggle is going on between the state and black labour. Monopoly capital and the state appear to be encouraging the organization and registration of black industrial and mining labour in the hope of containing its growing militancy. On the subject of apartheid, Yudelman's is less illuminating. Since his main concern is to show that South Africa represents a rather typical example of a newly industrialized country like Brazil or The Phillipines, he is insensitive to the political character of the developmental dictatorship. It is a common place to point out that growing state intervention is a key feature of monopoly capitalist society, whatever the character of the regime. But it is surely of vital importance to the members of society whether the regime in power is fascistic or social democratic. Yudelman is right to point out the continuity of symbiotic relationship between big capital and the South African state over the past 80 years. The same is true of Germany and Italy. But in order to understand the specific character of apartheid it is necessary to examine the Afrikaner nationalist movement/regime which conceived and implemented it.

O'Meara analyses Afrikaner nationalism from the early 1930s to the white electoral victory in 1948. In opposition to the dominant view of Afrikaner nationalism as an irrational monolithic mass movement, he conceives of it as «a historically specific, often surprisingly flexible, always highly fractured and differentiated response of various identifiable and changing class forces — in alliance — to the contradictions and struggles generated by the development of capitalism in South Africa». The Great Depression, 1929-1933, led to realignment of political forces in South Africa and a fundamental break in the development of Afrikaner nationalism. A new «purified» Nationalist Party was formed to oppose the United Party led by the Boer-War Generals Hertzog and Smuts. The dominant force behind the new party was the secret Afrikaner Broederbond, an order led by the urban petty bourgeoisie elite. These highly educated and dedicated young men, many of whom had received doctorates from German and Dutch universities, believed that it was the historical mission of the united Afrikaner volk to rule South Africa. (Afrikaners represented 60% of the white population, 12% of the total population of South Africa). In the Mid-1930s the Broederbond began to mobilize Afrikaners politically on the basis of a new concept of the volk as a race-conscious organic national community.

Volkskapitalisme represented the economic dimension of the new «Christian-Nationalist» Weltanschauung. Its goal was to mobilize the volk to capture the «British-Jewish» capitalist system and to adapt it to a model of national socialism based on the organic community of Afrikaner businessmen, farmers and workers. The «socialist» character of Volkskapitalisme referred to giving back the services of the Afrikaner worker to his volk, and thereby saving him from the delusion of solidarity with internationalist working class parties. It also involved saving the volk from social distress, for many Afrikaners were extremely poor in the 1930s. O'Meara analyses the tension between the petty bourgeoisie ideal of benefitting every member of the volk and the promotion of Afrikaner capitalism. The ideology claimed that it was necessary for Afrikaner workers to be employed by Afrikaner capitalists, in order to prevent the «exploitation» of Afrikaner «labour power» by «foreign» capitalists.

It was not until the mid-1940s that the Broederbond ideologues turned their attention to the «native question». In the previous decade, South Africa had experienced rapid economic growth, the war stimulated industrialization and urbanization of Africans. In the 1940s the African intelligentsia, organized in the African National Congress (ANC), was demanding the extension of political rights to blacks and the African workers were rapidly forming trade unions with the assistance of white left-wing radicals. The policy of apartheid was designed to counter the threat that black claims for social equality in the post-World War II era of democratization and decolonization posed to the Afrikaner volk's racial purity and political and economic interests.* In theory apartheid is just the extension of the Volkskapitalisme concept to other ethnic groups in South Africa. Ideally every volk/race group was to have what the Afrikaner volk demanded for itself – a separate socio-economic system in which the volk would receive the fruits of its own labour. In practice the apartheid policy has meant the tyranny of the Afrikaner volk over the «non-white» people of South Africa. O'Meara mainly attributes this bitter reality to the fact that the «anti-capitalist» volks ideology of Broederbond *was a mask* for the capitalist aspirations of the Afrikaner petty bourgeoisie. In supplying cheap and controlled labour to the mines, industries, and farms, and protecting white workers from competition with black workers, the apartheid system has acted as a spur to rapid industrialization. In the period 1948 to 1970, of all the capitalist economies only that of Japan expanded faster than apartheid South Africa.

These two path-breaking studies place South Africa squarely in the framework of twentieth century Western capitalism and imperialism. Unfortunately, O'Meara found little value in comparing the «Christian Nationalist» Afrikaner movement which arose in the 1930s with European fascist movements. He also failed to analyse Afrikaner antisemitism, which was a key element in the strategy for the political and economic mobilization of the volk. My own research reveals that «purified» Afrikaner nationalism is a variety of classical fascism.* By taking *Mein Kampf* or Rumanian fascism with its «National Christian Socialist» ideology into account, O'Meara would have enriched his presentation of this decisive chapter in modern South African history. In conclusion, I should point out that both books contain interesting epilogues analysing the current situation in South Africa. Today the Afrikaner elite has emerged as a full partner in the country's highly internationalized capitalist class. The nouveau riche leaders of the Nationalist Party now require a more flexible ideology to meet both the skilled labour shortage and the growing threat posed by the liberation movement and the working class. It is no surprise to learn that the counter-revolutionary «Total Strategy», adopted after the Soweto uprisings in 1976, is a variation of the anti-communist «National Security Doctrine» embraced by so many military dictators in the newly industrialized states of the Third World. South Africa's leaders hope that by modifying the racist policy of apartheid, which has led to international ostracization, they may yet retain their position behind the Western defences and thereby stave off a revolution.

* See Howard Simson «*The Social Origins of Afrikaner Fascism and its Apartheid Policy*», Uppsala Studies in Economic History, 21 Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm