

ASPECTS IN THE TRANSITION FROM SLAVERY TO SERFDOM:  
THE SOUTH AFRICAN REPUBLIC 1842-1902

by

Stanley Trapido

Between 1840 and 1940 two successive modes of production - first slavery and then a system akin to serfdom - dominated agrarian society in the Transvaal South African Republic. This essay is devoted to an exposition - in the briefest outline - of the forms which these modes took. For the completion of any such enquiry it is also, of course, necessary to examine the critical changes which transformed slavery into serfdom and then saw serfdom disintegrate as capitalist forms of production began to predominate. It is not, however, possible to deal with this aspect within the framework of this paper.

For reasons which are to be found in the particular historical formation, slavery and its related forms of production are most evocatively described as the Boer mode of production. But it should become self-evident that this description carries no moral implications of contemporary or latter-day superiority for the observer. In Boer society, men lived precariously upon nature and close to it. Slavery and then serfdom gradually imposed their harsh shapes upon the society which emerged in the second half of the 19th century. Not only economic life in this social formation, but the awareness which men had of their rough-hewn world and their necessarily brutal power, evolved out of the heightening and intensifying of the institutions of slavery as a result of the impact and interaction of successive external modes of production and exchange. These external modes of production, which were dominant but far from being set in motion everywhere, were those of mercantile capitalism, given greater range by manufacturing capitalism, and then, in the last quarter of the century, a related financial capitalism. In particular, the great increase in commercial hunting, mainly for ivory, introduced arms and ammunition on a scale that only manufacturing capitalism could provide for. At the same time the organization of the hunt created new social forms which may have had far-ranging social consequences in transforming decentralized political systems into centralized states. The monopoly in arms and ammunition given to the Boers after 1852 - even if it was honoured more in the breach than the observance - gave them an economic as well as military advantage over other peoples in the interior. But, while it is more usual to stress the military and political transformations which this wrought, it is equally arguable that the economic advantage given to the Boers became the source of their military power. The collapse of the republic in the seventies may well have been the result of their forced withdrawal from their Zoutpansberg trading centre, Schoemansdal, in the previous decade.

The slave mode of production in the Transvaal had three essential components: slaving expeditions and wars which grew out of the slaving expeditions, a parallel or simultaneous raiding for booty, and the maintenance of tributary relations created by reducing tribal peoples to ever increasing servitude. All three elements were inter-related, although at different times different components of the

system predominated. Simultaneously, even though most exchange relationships were pervaded by coercion, there was a considerable amount of trade in which force was absent. If it is a caricature to portray the Boers as never undertaking mercantile activities in their own right (and, in the crucial sphere of land, Boer speculators make the caricature totally false), it is true that both their mode of production and the constraints of external forces limited their commercial activities and, as with the slave societies of antiquity, their commercial class was largely made up of outsiders. At the same time, slavery developed an ideology which made much manual labour demeaning to free men. We should treat with suspicion the interpretation that the unwillingness of the latter-day white proletarians to undertake manual labour is the result of a cultural lag, but our suspicion that we are dealing with an ideological construct of contemporary hegemonic groups should not blind us to the reality of one of the structural constraints of slavery: an ideological barrier which was the creation of the specific historical formation.

The combination of commercial reticence and the reluctance to engage in certain forms of manual labour may have led the Boers to exclude themselves from the gold diggings of Pilgrims Rest, Lydenberg and Barberton. Slavery had produced a haughty arrogance among them, and had intensified the sense of equality within the community of the free. This sense of equality of free men disguised the inequalities of wealth present from the very beginning. Haughtiness enabled them to reinterpret the myths of the old testament, so that the Boers came to see themselves as the reincarnation of Jehovah's chosen people. As they traversed the wilderness, they named the headwaters of a stream which lies 22 degrees south of the equator Nylstroom (Nile stream). Mercantile capitalism, slavery, the Heidelberg catechism, and the vagaries of a frightening nature produced the irreducible aspects of Boer society.

Raiding was the most important method of procuring slaves, though trading with African societies - usually themselves slave raiders - was another source. Since slavery was forbidden under the treaty by which Boer independence was acknowledged by Britain, republican law created a façade which forbade both the condition of the totally unfree labourer and the sale or barter of such. Since no very great distance was put between the slave's community of origin and his place of enslavement, deracination was achieved by the seizure of children rather than adults. These children were deemed to be orphans - very often slave raiding ensured that they became orphans - and the law required that they be registered or "ingeboek". These inboekselings, the "apprentices" of the ambivalent English documentation, were required to serve their masters until the age of 25 if they were male, and 21 if they were female. There is, however, no evidence of the emancipation of the inboekselings at their coming of age. Although the law forbade their sale, compensation for their keep could be claimed if they were handed on to new masters. This compensation varied from bars of iron, a heifer, a horse, trade goods or cash. That the laws were largely intended for British consumption is readily enough established. M. W. Pretorius, the first President of the South African Republic and the most energetic of anti-slavery legislators, was himself involved in transactions which were without doubt the purchase of slaves. "If you get some little Kaffirs be so good as to buy six for me and send them when you can and write me what it will cost to procure 3 girls and 3 boys" ("Als u klijn Kaffers krijg wees so goet en koop voor mij 6"). In addition, the records show that the greatest number of inboekselings went to landdrosts and other officials of the Republic.

Slaves served the household economy in its varied agricultural, pastoral and domestic activities. Slaves were herdsmen, voorleiers (ox wagon leaders), the diggers of irrigation canals and the builders of dam and kraal walls, the constructors of the original Boer house, the rondavel, child-minders and rearers, the dryers of fruit and venison and the makers of wine brandy.

These were some of the many activities of Boer slaves. Tribute labour provided the additional hands required for the preparing of fields, for sowing, weeding and harvesting. Tribute peoples provided bearers, as we have noted, for the great hunts in which ivory and animal skins were collected. Not least, it was tribute labour which raised up the first church, at Rustenburg. Tribute was, moreover, paid in kind: ivory and animal skins. Booty raids - for cattle and cereals in particular -

added to the economic surplus and made possible the extensive trade with the outside world.

Although coercion was central to the Boer mode of production, the Boer state was relatively weak until the last decade of its existence. Until that decade, its administrative machine was barely distinguishable from its military force - field cornets and local commandants were responsible for the seizure as well as the administration of land and labour. Each burgher had to provide his own arms, ammunition, horses and provisions for the kommando. In practice it was the field cornet and commandant and their seniors who provided for the larger part of the costs of the kommando, and who obtained the greater share of its spoils. The decision by the British administration in the Cape in the 1820s to transform the system of rural and local government probably played as important a part in the decisions which led to the great Trek as the measures intended to create "free" labour among the Khoi. The Transvaal's agrarian proprietors paid for the cost of expeditions, but in return their share of slaves, plunder and land was disproportionately large. The essential paradox of this situation was, however, that while resources existed for the plundering economy the state was bereft of income, since the Boer landowners either refused to tax themselves or, if they did agree to pass tax laws, they refused to pay their taxes. In this contradiction is to be found one of the reasons for the political, financial and military collapse of the state in the mid-seventies. As late as April 1902, in the dying weeks of the republic, Louis Botha confessed that it was only his remaining personal wealth which kept him in the field. Nor could the taxing of Africans or the gathering of tribute in kind add much to the state's revenue, since the landdrosts and commandants ensured that the greater part of the opgaaf paid by Africans ended up as their own property. Where taxes in cash were imposed, an absence of specie meant that officials continued to seize cattle and grain, assessing their value at far below that which would be received for them from the market. Traders in the interior began to intercept these official plundering raids by attempting to purchase for cash goods which would otherwise be seized. These exchanges were less unequal but they still acquired a substantial part of the surplus from the African mode of production. In addition, the impact of the trader in bringing Africans into the cash nexus had in the long run much the same sort of impact as the more direct method of primitive accumulation of Boer notables.

Commerce was largely in the hands of the coastal merchants and their inland agents and sub-agents, and it was they who determined credit, rates of exchange and the commodities which they would accept in exchange for their goods. The profits of Natal merchant houses were extremely high, and the trading system which seems to have been Natal's major source of income was dependent on the surplus of African and Boer modes of production.

There are other reasons for the collapse of the republic, in the 1870s, which arose out of its slave economy in the Transvaal. Slaves determined the extent of productivity of the society. To extend this productivity, the mode of production admitted of only one answer - further territorial expansion rather than economic innovation. Territorial expansion, however, cannot continue indefinitely - oceans and deserts, though not uninhabited, provide diminishing returns for slaving and plundering expeditions; and, even before the natural boundaries to expansion are reached, external social and economic forces set limits to continued expansion. So, too, with the Transvaal. By the mid-eighteen seventies, the need for further conquest had set expeditions moving, or threatening to move, in a western, eastern and northern direction. Expansionary expeditions strained the military resources of the society without contributing to the state's capacity to maintain itself. This expansion, a consequence of the slave mode of production, was widely disruptive. Long distance trade within Boer and African societies was made insecure beyond usual expectations, the retaliation of the Pedi for Boer raids threatened the gold diggings of the eastern Transvaal, the disruption of movement of African labourers to the diamond fields along the western reaches of the Republic, and the frustration of hopes for a similar movement of labour along its eastern circumference to the Natal sugar plantations, are all attributed to the Boer mode of production.

The similarities between the early Boer economic and political forms and those of African peoples in the centralized states of southern Africa has often been noticed. Boer and African societies were predominantly pastoralist, both dependent on unfree labour. Both societies had been differentiated and communal modes were disintegrating. The collecting together and the transformation of the small Boer communities into a centralized state in the decade after the great trek were similar to the transformation that had taken place or was taking place among Nguni and Sotho peoples of the interior in the first half of the 19th century. Both peoples had slave raiding and plundering economies in common, and a great many "orphaned" slaves acquired by the Boers came from African kingdoms who exchanged them for trade or to maintain political alliances. But there were significant differences. The Boer mode of production was marked by an adherence to Roman-Dutch law, which gave an absolute right to property (most notably landed property), and its converse (the absolute right to its alienation).

Land was distributed to the original Boer migrants on a very generous basis. Two six-thousand acre farms, the second being for winter grazing, were given as of right before 1870. But hunting appeared to be so much more profitable that many burghers abandoned or sold their farms and moved on in search of game. From the 1850s it was the wealthier Boers who were buying and selling farms at a significant rate. The young field cornet Paul Kruger gave up hunting in the 1850s because his activities in land speculation were taking up more and more of his time. The administration of land, its measurement, registration, sale and foreclosure, were placed in the hands of the field cornets, who, as we have seen, were among the most prosperous men in their districts, and their strategic position in relation to land purchase ensured that they remained among the most prosperous. But all officials, native commissioners, commandants, landdrosts, and members of the Volksraad and executive members and the President and Commandant General, were well placed to acquire information about the likelihood of suitable land coming up for sale or being made available to the public. From their privileged positions these officials acquired substantial land holdings. Again, we see office ensured that those with wealth would continue to have it.

The empty coffers of the Boer exchequer and the use of land to reward those who served society meant that foreigners like the Scot McCorkindale, in the 1860s, and the Hungarian Nelmapius, in the seventies and eighties, who helped or promised to help improve communications, or offered to establish commercial and banking institutions, were paid in land. The merchants of the coastal entrepôts and their banking associates also took payment in land or indulged in land speculation, floating companies which they hoped would attract foreign investment. The Netherlands Railway Company (which, in spite of its name, was a German-based financial consortium) was offered three million morgen by President Burgers as an additional inducement to build a railway from the Transvaal to Delagoa Bay. This came, it should be noted, within three years of Burgers claiming that the land frontier had reached its end. In this way, and before the certainty of massive mineral deposits gave an additional dimension to the acquisition of land, very large landholdings had fallen into the hands of Boer and foreign land syndicates. Land with mineral deposits increased the fortunes of the wealthier Boers, but this process of enrichment was paralleled by a process of impoverishment as land hoarding reduced the amount of land available to the Boer community. At the same time, the Boer inheritance law was marked by a complete sub-division of the patrimony, and this may have fostered large-scale land purchase among notables. But land speculation was not the only mechanism for ensuring that the property of notable families was not reduced by constant sub-division. Land without labour and cattle was of little use. As we have seen, the authority to lead plundering or slaving raids was essential for the recouping of notable fortunes, and this authority was derived from wealth and political office.

Roman-Dutch law was the link which bound the primitive community of the interior of South Africa to the property relations of the past and created the potential for that distinct form of property which was to shape capitalism in South Africa in one of its national aspects, which we have come to call Afrikaner Capitalism. Equally, these property relations helped to make two of the distinct elements of the South African proletariat - the Transvaal Afrikaner working class and the black agrarian proletariat, and, less directly, the African mining and industrial proletariat, both settled and migrant. The process of proletarianization was different for the two groups.

While forced alienation reduced the land available to tribal cultivators, Afrikaner proprietors made use of a form of engrossment to hasten kinsmen and clients on the path to proletarianization. Usufructuary rights to land had concealed the effects of successive sub-divisions but the increased value of land - as a result of new markets - suddenly transformed the notorious dwarf-holdings into actual rather than fictitious economic units. The result was the penury of the kinsmen-clients, although for some this was delayed by their becoming transport riders until the double disaster of railways and cattle disease destroyed their final economic refuge.

The impact of the market on those Boer tenants who paid rent in kind - Afrikaner sharecroppers, known as bywoners - was similarly devastating. The proportion of the product demanded of them by their landlords became so large that they could not subsist as independent producers. Moreover, since access to African labour had been determined in the first place by slaving and tribute expeditions of the decades between 1840 and 1875 and the wars of the eighties, the poorer peasants, whether tenants or landowners, were left with a very small labour force. In 1887 the Executive and Volksraad of the Republic reluctantly accepted the clamour from sections of the Boer population for a redistribution of labour. The Plakkerswet of 1887 purported to be such a redistributory measure. If it was not explicitly so, this was because they were reluctant to use a form of words which stated that forced labour was the intention of the law as this might provide the excuse for British intervention under the 1884 Convention. The Plakkerswet was, therefore, explicit only in being an anti-squatting law, giving powers to landlords to enable them to retain or regain de facto control over land which they owned. There was nothing explicit in the law either in 1887 or when it was re-enacted in 1895 on the redistribution of labour. Not surprisingly, most officials were hostile to the wet because it threatened their interests. It also threatened the state, and the Commandant-General went out of his way to advise officials not to attempt to enforce the plakkerswet where they might meet African resistance. Both the wealthy burghers and the land companies sought exemptions from the legislation. High-ranking officials were revealed to have reserves of labour held in the expectation of agricultural enterprise. Absentee landlords and land companies were opposed to the redistribution of squatters since this would reduce the number of their cash-paying tenants, and in some few cases land companies used their farms as private labour reserves. The legislation did little more than highlight inequality in all resources, labour as well as land.

If the proletarianization of the Afrikaner peasant had begun with the closing of the land frontier and ended with the permanent expansion of the market controlled by Boer proprietors, African cultivators were transformed into peasants as absentee landlords encouraged cash rent from small holdings on farms denied to poor whites. In their turn these peasants were - in the long run - transformed into proletarians by markets being closed to them. But the impact of the market had other more direct effects on the African population. From among those who had been enslaved as children and grown to adulthood as deracinated and then acculturated farm hands, the so-called oorlams-kaffers, came a group of self-supporting bailiffs. Tributary labourers, whose own grazing and arable lands were diminishing as a result of alienation, and who were more and more compelled to provide their services several times over during the crucial periods of the agricultural cycle, opted for the protection of a single proprietor who was able to provide them with land. In practice, this group transformed their tribute labour into a rent, albeit paid unwillingly, in labour. Since farms were very large, the oorlam families and the less acculturated former tributaries were allowed to graze considerable numbers of cattle and other stock and to grow crops on a relatively substantial basis, with the iron plough displacing the wooden hoe and increasing productivity. The greater part of the family was still expected to turn out for sowing, harvesting and weeding (skoffeling). The younger males provided a rota which might have a three or four year cycle to provide labour for the day-to-day activities of the farm. A similar cycle among women provided labour for the household. The number of days which the young males on the rota had to supply was forty before 1900, and ninety after that date. When compared with the obligation to provide at least fourteen days of tributary labour, it is apparent that there was a considerable increase in agrarian activities between the early and the late period.

In the 1880s and 1890s, a new group of unfree labourers was added to the agricultural work force of the Republic. These were the prisoners of war captured in

battles against African peoples in the north-eastern Transvaal. The battles followed the unilateral extension of the Republic's boundaries, which meant that several northern peoples who considered themselves to be independent were peremptorily converted into subjects of the Boers by the drawing of new boundaries. Conflict followed the Boer attempt to make good these new boundaries, and their superior armaments enabled them to defeat the Mapoch in 1881, the Malaboch in 1893, and then the Venda in 1898. Defeated peoples, under indenture for five years, were sentenced to pay fines for their "treason". These fines could not be met, nor could the defeated Mapoch people pay the arrears in taxes which their being given a retrospective history of subjection imposed upon them. The fines and taxation were paid - at least notionally - by those indenturing families (and much was made of the attempts to keep these families together). The indenture was to be for five years, but in practice the unstated intention was to keep the Mapoch and other peoples in a state of perpetual servitude because they could be refused permission to leave the Boer demense unless they had paid their fines and repaid their taxes. Since, however, the terms of their indenture stipulated that no family should be paid more than £3 a year and that this payment should include the value of land made available for arable and grazing land, other payments in kind as well as any cash payments, the legal possibility of freeing themselves from this indenture was remote. In practice, hundreds of families "disappeared", and the state's ability to restore these particular groups to the Boer demense was not very effective.

All labour tenants were attached to the land partly by the force which the farmer or his field cornet, native commissioner or other functionary could muster, and partly because land available outside of white farms was being reduced. In addition, the process of deracination of the earliest "apprentices" inhibited the return of African labour-tenants to areas where the African mode of production was still predominant. At the same time, land company peasants increased the potential bargaining power of the labour-tenants and the wage employment of the gold mines offered an additional alternative to African peasants, both from land company farms and from the Boer demense, who sought to supplement their incomes.

In the last decade of the 19th century, a shortage of farm labourers among the less well-to-do Boer farmers created massive resentment. Reports that Boer farmers - or rather their children - were having to plough and act as voorleiers were produced in great abundance, and the allegation that these children were being denied the opportunity to learn the catechism produced a sense of wrathful foreboding. Denied religious instruction, men would lose the consciousness which reinforced relationships of power. And yet those who, in a well-ordered universe, should have undertaken this labour were to be found living a life of "idleness", under the patronage of their chiefs, or absentee landlords, or even refusing to pay their labour rents on Boer farms. Those natural obstacles to work - collective conviviality, drinking and polygamy - became the focus of Boer fury. This fury gave rise to as much violence in the procuring and forcing of labour as had been the case in the previous decades. Little wonder, then, that the defeat of the Boer state in 1902 saw a widespread black jaquerie. These land seizures, though many in number, were politically isolated. Individual families attempted to regain the ownership of land. Their success was short-lived. The British army permitted the Boer commandos to remain under arms, and together the two military forces ensured that labour-tenant peasants were put down. With agrarian property secured once more, the dismantling of the Boer state - and most obviously the destruction of the office of field cornet and commandant - could begin. The immediate effect of this was to be the growth of rent-paying tenants on land company farms because of an increased freedom of movement. This was to be short-lived, and the British political accommodation of the Boer proprietors meant that in the conflict between the rent estates of the land companies and the demense farms of the mainly Boer producers the latter were to regain power in the countryside. They were aided in this by the anti-squatter legislation of 1908, and the celebration of their power was symbolically re-enacted in the 1913 Land Act - but that is part of another story.

By 1900, however, the Boer state was far more than the economic and social power of the field cornets and commandants writ large. The British withdrawal in 1881 was made possible, not by the chance defeat of a fragment of the British army, or even by the deception and self-deception of British parliamentary politics. Rather, the crisis which had provoked direct British intervention in southern Africa had been

resolved by that intervention. The Pedi and the Zulu, both threatened by Boer expansionism and both in the mid-seventies capable of resisting it, and, by implication, of dismantling the existing mercantile heremong, were both defeated by British military power. In resolving this crisis and then not intervening to stop the distribution of "Mapoch" prisoners of war or the attempted redistribution of "squatters", the "imperialism of free trade" looked upon the Boer state as the safeguard of the mercantile status quo. What followed was, however, a struggle between the Afrikaner state and the old mercantile interests, which paralleled the conflict between demense farming and peasant-tenant production and reflected broadly similar interests. Very soon after the retrocession, the new President of the South African Republic, Paul Kruger, announced a policy intended to encourage those with capital, technical and managerial skills to come to the Republic by granting them monopolies to produce industrial goods. "The first essential is the development of the resources of the country, so that our imports are reduced and our exports increased; or, to speak more clearly, so that we export goods and import money ..."

The range of these monopolies, known as concessions, was considerable, ranging from the more important manufacture of arms, ammunition and explosives to the control of the bottling of jam. In between lay the sole right to the highly lucrative distillation of spirits - a process which, as Charles van Onselen has shown, required industrial skills and organization beyond the scope of the original Boer mode of production - and the ideologically as well as financially rewarding concession of being the only printer of school books. In the main these concessions ended up in the hands of non-Afrikaners, although Afrikaner notables were the essential intermediaries in the granting of these concessions. But to stress that non-Afrikaners were the immediate beneficiaries of the concessions policy is to ignore the fact that it was British manufacturers and colonial mercantile houses which were being by-passed. The monopolies sometimes failed - at least in the short term - to produce locally manufactured goods and the monopolists and their local intermediaries profited by deliberately subverting the intention of the concessions policy, the creation of local self-sufficiency. But if that was all that we saw in the concessions policy, then our perception of the origins of capitalist industrialization bears the hallmarks of neo-classical intransigence. Deception, fraud and corruption are commonplace in the origins of industrial as well as mercantile capitalism. They are essential in gaining control of markets and are part of the process of accumulating capital. Much work remains to be done before the hypothesis that manufacturing capitalism was coming into being in the Transvaal before the South African war can be validated. But the hypothesis will not be falsified by attempting to measure the scale of operations. What we must seek to do is to identify the essential features of the concessions and determine the extent to which it would permit industrialization. In this connection one very important indicator is the increase in the range of the state's activities and the role of the Hollander and Cape Afrikaner civil servants, whose function was to assist these infant industries. It is true that the second Witwatersrand, the Witwatersrand of heavy capital investment in the period after the development of deep level mining, generated needs. We must note, however, that gold mining hardly encouraged these needs to be met locally (and in the period of reconstruction the Milnerite destruction of successful concessions is not without significance) but, more important, it is essential to emphasise that the existence of needs does not of itself generate a capacity, or even a potential, to meet them. It is possible to imagine a gold-mining industry itself totally independent of local labour and local agriculture. We know that at a particular moment in time it attempted to make itself independent of local labour (and at that time it was independent of Boer demense production). Indentured Chinese labour may be seen as an attempt to seek labour outside the Continent, but the social forces which ultimately diverted the attempt are closely related. On one level the inability of the mining industry to obtain sufficient labour was the result of a significant lowering of wages. But we are not dealing with the pristine labour "market". The decline in the number of African mine workers is related to the elimination of the pre-war state as a major force in directing labour. Field cornets and commandants, to some profit, had played a part in cajoling and pressing Africans into service for the mines. After the war, the field cornets and commandants could no longer be permitted free rein because the obverse side of their role in labour "repression" was the part they played in the military wing of the Boer state. Military defeat, we have noted, required disarmament and the formal disbanding of the Boer command structure, and this must be seen as a serious limitation to the recruitment of labour. The Boer mode of production had, however, not lost its momentum and its contrary energies produced resistance to Chinese labour in the form of a new political organization, Het Volk. The reasons for Boer

objection to the indenturing of Chinese workers was their fear that, without the aid of mining and the state which supported its hegemony, militarization of African labour would be greatly delayed. The mobilization of a resurgent Afrikaner social formation was undertaken by the old field cornets, who, although they were no longer part of the formal apparatus of the state, still had considerable influence. British accommodation of Afrikaner demands was not simply an act of imperial cowardice. It was the only way of resolving the contradictions of Transvaal's social formation. Without the field cornets and commandants, there could not be sufficient labour; if there was to be sufficient labour, a part at least of the Boer state's repressive mechanisms had to be restored.

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