

CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN EARLY SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR HISTORY

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Culture is a contentious topic in South African history. In its popular usage, it has provided legitimacy for racial exclusivism and segregation. [1] In its anthropological form, it has been accused of occulting the exploitation and conflict inherent in colonialism and industrialization. [2] Yet, elsewhere in Africa, culture has been seen as a source of local knowledge whose interpretation can allow the historian to enter into the history of the other. Vansina has stressed that meaning in oral history is to be found beneath the recounted facts in the metaphors, metonyms, clichés, and other aspects of rhetoric as a performance; Ranger has illustrated how a cultural form such as dance constitutes a social expression that can be read in the manner of a text; and Vail and White have shown the power of songs as a medium through which the voiceless gave expression to their feelings and beliefs. [3] Robert Darnton, influenced by the anthropology of Clifford Geertz, has advocated much the same approach to the history of the “inarticulate” in Europe. More recently, the Comaroffs have advocated an historical anthropology that fuses the material and the mental and that focuses on culture as a source of power and as a pre-eminent site of struggle. [5]

This form of analysis, it seems to me, has the advantage of allowing one to deduce the consciousness of the subject from “local texts” rather than from the social and economic context generated by the historian. It breaks up the culturally coded concepts through which we impose our vision on the past; and it allows us to see interests as the product of the strategies of difference that produce identity. In this essay I shall confine myself to recent works on the history of early industrialization. I start with a genuflection to the leaders in the field, outline what I see as problems in the ways in which they employ notions of culture and identity and, in the final section, provide some suggestions aimed at resolving these problems.

In 1976 the history of labour in southern Africa was transformed when Frederick Johnstone outlined the structural conditions of exploitation on the early Witwatersrand and Charles van Onselen examined the forms of resistance and class consciousness developed by mine workers in southern Rhodesia. Eleven years later, much of the approach developed over the previous decade was reflected and refined in two important books on the early history of the Kimberley diamond fields. William Worger expanded the extent of the miners’ community to include areas of settlement beyond the compounds and included a chapter on the rural areas to explain migrant labour. [6] Robert Turrell documented the historical development of the compounds and stressed their importance as a means of disciplining a migrant labour force. Turrell was particularly critical of earlier attempts to reduce culture to a function of everyday “resistance” and candidly admitted that, once he had abandoned this approach, most of the evidence for a grassroots labour history evaporated. [7] Nevertheless, both historians carefully detailed important aspects of workers’ lives; the legal constraints on drinking and the movement of labour, the dangers of mine labour and, particularly, changes in the labour process that were a prelude to deep-level gold mining. While these works enriched our knowledge of the social history of nineteenth-century Kimberley, and South Africa in general, they also carried over some of the problems inherent in the history of labour first developed in the seventies, particularly the omniscience of capital and the central role in the narrative given to the notion of social control. [8] Capitalism was seen as a violating, penetrating force, bringing in its wake exploitation and cognitive dislocation. But the power of this image is achieved only if one discounts the ability of society to contain profound contradictions, such as the durability of non-capitalist values and the co-operation and consent that form an essential element, along with coercion and resistance, in the relations between employers and workers. [9]

Turrell and Worger presented a powerful history from above in which Europeans built institutions and took decisions that shaped and moulded the outlines of the workers' social life; the compound remained a prison, drinking purely a problem, the mining camps relentlessly pestilential, and labour relations were based on an almost mindless brutality. Migrant labour was viewed as an appendage rather than an integral, if not dominant, part of the workers' lives on the fields, and the men were seen to be crushed by a drab and dehumanized environment. [10] The notion of a seismic fault-line between capital and labour continued unchallenged while the removal of "resistance" as the touchstone for class consciousness rekindled earlier images of a crushed and emasculated black working class whose very image was defined by its nothingness. [11] Similarly, the organization of the narrative around the stark opposition between capital and labour obscured other important elements: the miner's pride in his work, his experience and courage; the compound as a community, the new values engendered by a social intercourse with a rich array of people of different origins; and a new dignity as the wage worker established his independence or assisted his family to overcome the autocracy of nature. [12] Hidden, too, was the way in which workers constructed their own notions of social inclusion and exclusion, morality and self-worth; and the relations of power and exploitation that divided and weakened the miners' community. Exploitation and conflict are important, even central, topics for the social history of labour, but if they are allowed to dominate the plot they frequently polarize society into competing, essentialist classes. Some adjustments were made to this image in the history of the early Witwatersrand when Jeeves carefully took apart the totalizing concept of "mining capital" and showed that, because of the competition between employers, many workers were able to negotiate their own wages and working conditions. Using oral evidence, and hence beyond the period of this essay, Moodie showed the importance of the everyday compromises reached between employers and labourers, and Beinart underlined the importance of the rural areas to the mine workers' consciousness. [13]

It has been difficult for South Africans to adopt unreservedly the culturalist approach of social historians working in Europe and the United States. [14] This is at least partly because cultural relativism has the disconcerting tendency to slide into separate development but also, I wish to hazard, because universal values are anchored in the anglophone intellectual tradition and institutions. Thus while South Africans borrowed extensively from the tradition of overt and hidden forms of resistance in slave studies, easily identifiable as universal responses to oppression, they underplayed the way in which subject peoples constructed difference by struggling to establish their own interpretation of meaning as the accepted norm. South African social historians were eager to adopt E P Thompson's injunction to rescue the historical experiences of working people from "the enormous condescension of posterity". But they interpreted experience in a positivist sense to mean a source of raw data that would provide the narrative with "nuance and texture" and allow history to "resonate with the lives of ordinary people". [15] They showed, understandably, less willingness to respond to the accompanying appeal, made by Thompson, for historians to recognize that class "experiences are handled in cultural terms", that workers' "aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience", and that they often had "an alternative definition of reality". [16] Many labour historians felt more secure with the model provided by the English working class, with its comprehensible habits and beliefs, and, particularly after the unbanning of the trade unions, turned to the study of worker institutions. [17] In this way migrant labourers tended to be excluded from the field of labour history and their culture received the gloss of an egalitarian "universalism". [18]

To break through the image of the other (in time and space) that is part of the western intellectual tradition, Richard Cobb has suggested that social historians use the conditional tense; Hobsbawm, like Malinowski, states that historians should "think and feel themselves into the skins ... of people who are unlike them"; while Thompson remarks that we have to recapture how people defined their identity as they "lived their own history". [19] The problem, as any anthropologist will know, is that we approach the other with a series of "dominant conventions and suppositions" and a specific "prior-textualization". [20] We then

employ a specific discursive tradition when creating the historical text. This consists particularly of metaphors - such as the prison for the compound or New Ninevah and Babylon for Johannesburg that present specific ideas (unfree labour, corruption). It also consists of binary oppositions that, like metaphors, present clarity at the cost of meaning(s) - pre-capitalist-capitalist, war-peace, popular-elite, and so on. These essentializing or totalizing categories also extend to terms of identity such as working class-capitalist, Zulu-Xhosa, Christian-heathen, etc. Similarly a plot, such as that built around notions of social control and resistance, organizes facts in such a manner as to produce conflict as the dominant sub-text. Hence language (such as the "new vocabulary" developed by historians in the 1970s) is less of a neutral referent, through which to capture the past more realistically, than a way of arranging and ordering facts so as to create meaning. [21]

One means of avoiding the temptation to speak for people who have no written tradition of history is for social historians to privilege in their research the systems of signification through which people assembled and gave expression to their lived experience. Here I mean rituals and rites of passage (that mark time, status and belonging) as well as everyday, mundane habits and gestures; a careful evaluation of the symbolism produced by changing patterns of consumption, and an analysis of folklore, proverbs and songs, metaphors and other rhetorical devices; religious and secular beliefs, and even the diseases that constitute a discourse of the body. The object is not just to document the social condition of labour, but also to attempt an interpretation of the themes, genres and conventions through which people, including historians, have created their own sense of meaning. This calls for an awareness of semiotics and conflates economic history with the history of ideas; it particularly rejects a notion of ideology that draws a dichotomy between appearance and reality, base and superstructure. The meaning of specific material objects, no less than experiences, is interpreted in terms of the symbols and signifying practices with which they are invested. Hence the way in which things are perceived, from drinking to faction fighting to sexual relations, or from iron hoes to clothing and biological differences, is imbedded in temporal and spatial contexts. By "reading" the way in which migrant workers assembled and rearranged their symbolic world we may enter their system of knowledge, and understand the power relations and logic behind their actions. A complementary task is to break down the categories of clan, class, ethnicity, race, gender, age, community and nationality; to see them not as fixed givens, but either as totalizing notions through which people have been historically ordered and classified according to the assumptions of post-enlightenment thinking, or as complex social artefacts produced by the strategies of differentiation through which people continually seek to situate themselves and others in time and space. But this does not mean that the historian should abandon a history of structures and become imprisoned within the mental horizons of the other. After all, abstract concepts such as demography, ecology, economy, religion or the state help historians fashion the general features of social life and provide a wider context from which to view the subjective ways in which individuals experience births and deaths, changes in the frequency of rainfall and the price of goods, changes in wages, or their relations with ancestors or colonial officials.

By approaching culture as a range (or repertoire) of resources that may be assembled, asserted, repressed, rejected or imposed in different situations, I take the view that identity is situational and fluid. Nevertheless, culture cannot be adopted and abandoned at will as it is learnt and internalized over time, and frequently imposed within a specific social, economic and environmental situation. Migrant workers left home with a specific repertoire of values, signs and rituals of authority; on the mines these symbolic practices were reinforced, adapted, added to or abandoned as different groups attempted to establish their culture as hegemonic or natural. An analysis of these cultural practices opens a window into the self-perception and intentionality of individuals who have long been relegated to a past without history.

Notes

- 1 S Dubow, "Race, Civilization and Culture" in S Marks and S Trapido (eds), *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism* (London, 1987) p 87; E Boonzaaier, "Race and the Race Paradigm" in E Boonzaaier and J Sharp (eds), *South African Keywords* (Cape Town, 1988).
- 2 Charles van Onselen, "Black Workers in Central African Industry", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 1, 2, 1975, pp 236, 243. Frederic Johnstone "Most Painful to Our Hearts": South Africa through the eyes of the new school", *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 16, 1, 1982, p 18. Martin Legassick also denounced "historical pseudo-anthropology" in general in "The Northern Frontier to c1840: the rise and decline of the Griqua people", in R Elphick and H Giliomee (eds), *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840* (Cape Town, 1989) p 368.
- 3 J Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London, 1960; re-ed. 1985); T Ranger, *Dance and Society in East Africa* (London, 1975); L Vail and L White, *Power and the Praise Poem* (London, 1991). See also David Birmingham "Carnival in Luanda", *Journal of African History* 29, 1, 1988.
- 4 R Darnton, "Intellectual and Cultural History", in M Kammen (ed) *The Past Before Us: contemporary historical writing in the United States* (Ithaca, 1980), p 346; Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York, 1984). Two important recent collections on cultural history are Lynn Hunt (ed), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, London, 1989), and Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: between practices and representations* (Oxford, 1988). For a genealogy of this approach, see Gerard Noiriel, "Pour une Approche Subjectiviste du Social", in *Annales ESC*, 6, 1989, and Stuart Clark, "The Annales Historians" in Quentin Skinner (ed), *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, 1985).
- 5 Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991).
- 6 William Worger, *South Africa's City of Diamonds: mine workers and monopoly capitalism in Kimberley, 1867-1895* (New Haven, and Craighall, South Africa, 1987).
- 7 R V Turrell, *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields, 1871 -1890* (Cambridge, 1987), p xii.
- 8 Turrell is careful to show that the establishment of the compounds was the product of a struggle between different interest groups. But workers are assigned a marginal role in this struggle, particularly once the compounds start functioning and a "system" is created that allows company directors and mine managers to "hold all the cudgels of coercion in their hands" (*Capital and Labour*, pp 171-72). For the same teleological approach to social control, see Worger, *City of Diamonds*, p 146.
- 9 On the subtle dialectic of accommodation and resistance, and the need of employers to gain the consent of the workers, see P Joyce, *Visions of the People: industrial England and the question of class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), and M Burawoy, *The Politics of Production* (London, 1985).
- 10 A (contradictory) view, first established by Charles van Onselen who viewed the grievances arising from exploitation as the seed-bed of worker resistance and class consciousness. "For Africans to resist spontaneously and directly", he wrote, "they

simply needed to perceive the single dimension involved in the relationship of exploiter and exploited. This relationship they saw all too clearly." *Chibaro*, pp 244, 157. It was as if migrants arriving on the mines were blank slates or cultural ciphers on whom the experience of work would leave a common inscription.

- 11 Johnstone's definition of workers in terms of their "rightlessness and powerlessness" ("The Labour History of the Witwatersrand in the Context of South African Studies, and with Reflections on the New School", *Social Dynamics* 4, 1978, pp 102-03) is echoed by Worger's notion of "servile labour" (*City of Diamonds*, p 5). But the genre can be traced back to the writings of the 18th century abolitionists and the anti-slavery exposés of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Colin Newbury, working from a different historiographical tradition, is more cautious when he refers to black workers as "a cast of silent thousands": *The Diamond Ring: business, politics and precious stones in South Africa, 1867-1947* (Oxford, 1989), p 61.
- 12 This form of criticism has its own history. See Thomas Carlyle's "Chartism" in his *English and Other Critical Essays* (London, 1925). See also J Fabian "Kazi: the conceptualization of labour in a charismatic movement among Swahili-speaking workers", *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 50, 1971
- 13 Alan Jeeves, *Mining Labour in South Africa's Mining Economy: the struggle for the gold mines' labour supply, 1890-1920* (Kingston and Johannesburg, 1985); T Dunbar Moodie's "The Moral Economy of the Black Miners' Strike of 1946", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 13, 1, 1986. William Beinart, "Worker Consciousness, Ethnic Particularism and Nationalism: the experiences of a South African migrant, 1930-60" in Marks and Trapido, *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism* .
- 14 Something, I believe, that is at the basis of the "indigenous and eclectic synthesis" of radical history claimed by Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius, "Radical History and South African Society", *Radical History Review* 46/7, 1990, p 42.
- 15 S Marks, "The Historiography of South Africa: recent developments" in B Jewsiewicki and D Newbury (eds) , *African Historiographies* (Beverly Hills, 1986), p 174; Belinda Bozzoli, "History, Experience and Culture" in her, edited, *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal: capitalist penetration and popular response* (Johannesburg, 1983), p 8.
- 16 E P Thompson: *Whigs and Hunters* (London, 1975), p 183; "Class Consciousness" in R S Neale (ed), *History and Class*, (Oxford, 1983), pp 115-16, 118. See also his *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1963), p 11.
- 17 The British model dominates the evidence when, as in an important recent review, Charles van Onselen is fused with Eric Hobsbawm to describe the progenitors of the African working class as the former "lower orders" or "labouring poor": see Jon Lewis "South African Labor History: a historiographical assessment", *Radical History Review* 46/47, 1990, p 221. Asa Briggs reminds us that there was no single, typical English worker, *Victorian Cities* (Harmondsworth, 1968), p.116.
- 18 Beyond the sphere of ideas this perspective is reinforced, if not created, by the politics of publishing. See, for instance, the Cambridge University Press series in which a book on *Migrant Labourers* (Sharon Stichter, 1985) is separated from *Labour History in Africa* (Bill Freund, 1988).
- 19 R Cobb, *Promenades* (Oxford, 1980), p 3; E Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (London, 1959), pp 2-3, 175.
- 20 The first citation is from Quentin Skinner, "Hermeneutics and the Role of History" in *New Literary History* 7, 1, 1975, p 216; the second from Frederick Jameson, *The*

Political Unconscious: narratives as a socially symbolic Art (Ithaca, 1975), p 129.

- 21 On the importance of the "new language" of radical scholarship, see Johnstone, "Labour History", pp 102-3. See also Bozzoli and Delius, "Radical History", p 19. On the importance of plot and literary style in creating a reality effect, see U Ecco, "A Portrait of the Elder as a Young Pliny: how to build fame" in M Blonsky (ed), *On Signs: a semiotics reader* (Oxford, 1985).