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## THE SOUTH AFRICAN AGRARIAN TRANSFORMATION, 1880-1920: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

Christian Petersen

The impact of revisionist historiography on the interpretations of South African history has been profound. The study of agricultural history expanded during the 1970s and 1980s, and the results have changed our understanding of the South African experience. Yet, the topic of agrarian transformation was fiercely debated during the mid-1980s, and this paper gives an overview of the central issues separating structuralist and social historiography.

### Structuralist Historiography: The Prussian Path Experience

During the 1960s, historians began to use a Marxian analysis to understand the events and socio-economic features of South African history. By the mid 1970s Marxist scholarship dominated the intellectual discourse on the South African agrarian transformation. Mike Morris's writings, emphasizing a theoretical conceptualization of the transformation, became the centerpiece for future structuralist interpretations.

Morris's perspective on capitalist development in South African agriculture relies on two central and interrelated concepts. First, Morris identifies a three stage transition in production: peasant agricultural production, labor tenancy, and capitalist oriented production.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, in conjunction with the transition to capitalist agriculture, Morris catalogs the large scale intervention of the state in separating the wage-earning class from the landowning class.<sup>2</sup> The rapid industrialization of the Witwatersrand and Kimberley sparked the transition from peasant to capitalist production, as the establishment of urban centers created a high demand internal market for agricultural produce. The requirements of the domestic market forced farmers to "shift their source of income away from rent to the sale of their farm produce."<sup>3</sup> Consequently, peasant production shifted towards capitalist modes of production, whereby the "direct producers of capital are separated from the means of production."<sup>4</sup>

Morris, to periodize accurately the transition from peasant production to capitalist production, identifies a middle transitory stage termed labor tenancy. Morris defines labor tenancy as "The giving of services for a certain period in the year to the farmer by the Native

and/or his family in return for the right to reside on the farmer's land, to cultivate a portion of the land, and to raise stock on the farm."<sup>5</sup>

The 1913 Natives Land Act symbolizes the departure point away from peasant production, in the form of sharecropping in the Orange Free State and Southwestern Transvaal, to capitalist-oriented production. Morris argues that labor tenancy became the principal means of exploiting surplus labor throughout the countryside, and created a supply of labor for white landowners.<sup>6</sup>

Morris, before finalizing the transition to capitalist production following the 1913 Natives Land Act, explores the role of the state in forcing the African into the working class. Morris's theory of proletarianization adheres to the concept of a linear transformation from peasant to proletariat.<sup>7</sup> Morris argues: "By the 1920s, massive state intervention had secured the victory of the 'Prussian Path' of agrarian transformation from above, rendering the labor tenant a *de facto* wage laborer."<sup>8</sup> The Prussian Path experience derives from the patterns of transformation in Prussian agriculture and industry during the nineteenth century. In comparison, the Hertzog government, with the populist political support of poor whites, subsidized the development of agricultural capital within the white community.<sup>9</sup>

The internal transformation of the undercapitalized and pre-industrial white landowner into a capital intensive farmer represents the key point in the Prussian Path experience. The transition, as perceived by Morris, is a "sustained and self-generating process of capital accumulation," and represents the use of wage labor versus labor tenancy.<sup>10</sup>

In the World War II years, white farmers witnessed a massive tide of African migration from the countryside to urban centers which threatened their supply of farm labor. Morris cites the Fagan Commission (1948) which noted the "migration of 'Native males going to the towns and leaving their families on the farms' which was exacerbating the labor shortage there."<sup>11</sup> In response to the tide of migration away from the countryside, farmers established the South African Agricultural Union to develop a policy with the mining companies to equalize the labor supply, and end the waste associated with part-time labor tenancy. The farmers, now allied with mining capital, concentrated on abolishing the free market transfer of land between white and non-white, and to restrict the permanent urbanization of the non-white proletariat.<sup>12</sup>

Morris argues that the outcome of the 1948 elections "signaled the victory of the capitalist farmers over the direct producers; as the end of the phase of transition, it ushered in a new stage in the development of capitalist agriculture."<sup>13</sup>

In summary, Morris views the 1913 Natives Land Act as the central act of state intervention in destroying the peasant mode of production and ensuring the ultimate victory of capital over African labor. To expedite the processes of labor control and capital accumulation, white farmer lobbying pressured the government to legislate strict policies curbing sharecropping relationships and labor tenancy. Furthermore, the state enacted laws to restrict the mobility of younger and productive African labor, thereby ensuring the supply of labor to the farmers.

Fredrick Cooper, reflecting on the structuralist approach, states:

"The Prussian Road, or labor repressive capitalism, has been a very useful starting point for the analysis of South Africa. The prior establishment of a landowning class is thus crucial to understanding both the potential for transforming the system of production and the continued reliance on coercion—rather than an evolution toward a market in labor."<sup>14</sup>

Cooper observes that the prior establishment of the landowning class "helps to explain how it could find common ground with mining interests and—for all the conflicts that ensued—develop an increasingly sophisticated system of labor control."<sup>15</sup>

Martin Murray credits Morris's analysis with "emphasizing social-production relationships as the analytical point of departure for understanding the *primum mobile* for agrarian transformation."<sup>16</sup> He contends the "Prussian Path" experience and linear proletarianization establish "the theoretical and epistemological foundation to comprehend the long term patterns of capital accumulation and capitalist development."<sup>17</sup>

The Prussian Path experience in South Africa became the central theoretical conceptualization for structuralist historians trying to understand the South African agrarian transformation. However during the 1980s social historians in South Africa actively critiqued and questioned the validity and extent of African participation in wage labor throughout the countryside. Tim Keegan criticizes Morris for his dependence on "the analysis of the European transition from feudalism to capitalism as the basis of his explanation of transition in south Africa."<sup>18</sup> The Eurocentric approach, he contends, suggests an inevitability about the emergence of capitalist relations.<sup>19</sup>

Social historians have closely scrutinized the notion of linear proletarianization. William Beinart, writing on the political economy of Pondoland, claims the evidence within the Pondo economy does not support the massive proletarianization of the African peasant, and the

"penetration of merchant capital did not immediately imply new patterns of 'class differentiation linked to productive and market capacity'"<sup>20</sup>

Keegan, analyzing the productive relationships on the Orange Free State Maize Belt, suggests capitalist transformation in agriculture was never what it was at first sight, and that free labor under capitalism contains structural contradictions.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, he argues that the struggles between the working and capitalist classes over issues of remuneration and working conditions, were subsidiary to conflicts of primitive accumulation and against dispossession.<sup>22</sup>

### Social History: The Oral History Project

The beginning of the 1980s witnessed a significant revision in the historiographical perspective of the agrarian transformation. The social history view sought new avenues and methods of research, and stressed "an examination of the commercialization and capitalization of white agriculture, the changing class structures of the countryside, and the challenges mounted by the rural working class."<sup>23</sup> The social historians stressed the importance of analyzing the dynamics of local change, and the necessity to increase awareness in the variation between regions in the response to capitalism.<sup>24</sup> Martin Murray, in a critique of social history, describes it as resting "on the unstated premise that Marxist class analysis lacks the requisite flexibility and breadth to address the pressing problems of historical interpretation associated with human agency, social action, and contingency."<sup>25</sup>

One of the central investigative differences dividing the social and structuralist historiographies is the extensive use of oral histories to illuminate the personal experiences of ordinary South Africans. Belinda Bozzoli writes: "The trajectories of lives are explored, with varying references to the contexts in which particular forms of consciousness and ideology appear at particular stages."<sup>26</sup> The Oral History Project, initiated by the University of Witwatersrand in 1979, collected over one thousand interviews to compose the basis of social history research and framework.

The diversity of the historiographical writings by social historians complements their efforts to explore the multi-dimensional nature of the transformation at the turn of the 20th century. As with the structuralist review, this section concentrates on the issues of proletarianization and capital accumulation.

In response to the market demands of the mineral revolution, the growth of sharecropping production in the Orange Free State and Southwestern Transvaal represents the first step in the agrarian

transformation. Sharecropping arrangements allowed under-capitalized white farm owners to utilize African familial labor to produce a surplus. The sharecropper used his/her own assets, in the form of cattle, oxen, ploughs, and labor, to farm and 'share' the dividends with the landowners. These sharecropping relationships, as a mode of agricultural production, took place in the evolving context of rural capitalism.<sup>27</sup> Describing the relationship, Kas Maine, a Sotho farmer interviewed by the Oral History Project, says, "The seed was mine, the ploughs were mine, the oxen were mine. All was mine, only the land was his."<sup>28</sup> Keegan suggests that the sharecropping relationship offered the white farmers a stable labor supply, while simultaneously, permitting the African farmer to acquire cattle, prevent separation from the land, and participate in the expanding economy.<sup>29</sup>

The growth of sharecropping on the Free State and Transvaal farms increased the competition for scarce resources between Africans and poor white Afrikaaner farmers, *bywoners*. For instance, along the Basutholand and Free State border, the expansion of sharecropping on large white-owned farms, marginalized the response of *bywoners* to adopt intensive production techniques.<sup>30</sup> African success in sharecropping production, in the form of high quantity yields and low price, became a major political and economic grievance for under-productive white farmers.<sup>31</sup>

The *bywoners* felt threatened by the surge in African prosperity, and their independence from the agricultural labor market.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, African farmers took their agricultural profits, and reinvested in asset acquisition. The expansion of stock holdings—a sign of wealth and prestige—was a common investment by the African farmer.<sup>33</sup> In addition to cattle, some Africans established transport services to ferry produce from the countryside to the urban markets, and in doing so, they undercut the prices of their *bywoner* competitors; thereby, deepening the animosity held by poor whites against African prosperity.<sup>34</sup> In Pondoland, independent Africans survived as petty traders, transport riders, and 'runners' for recruiters.<sup>35</sup> The willingness of Africans to participate in the expanding economy becomes an important consideration in determining the extent of the Prussian Path process. The social historians argue that African participation in the competitive economy undermines the all-inclusive proletarian theories of the structuralists. Furthermore such initiatives in reinvestment reflect the uneven and varied impact of capitalization.<sup>36</sup>

The social historiographical perspective, having questioned the extent of proletarianization within the agricultural sector, also disputes the structuralist view of capital accumulation. Social historians, through

the use of oral testimony, perceive capital accumulation as an external process. Keegan argues that the "primitive accumulation of pre-capitalist wealth by settlers did not feed directly into capitalist production."<sup>37</sup>

The social historians utilize the conflicts arising between the 'progressive' (absentee) landowners and the *bywoners* to refute the processes forwarded by Morris. The interests of the 'progressive' farmers are exposed as conflicting with the concerns of the *bywoners* threatened by increasing African competition.<sup>38</sup> By the 1890s the divisions in wealth and prosperity in white society deepened, and the 'poor white' problem became a major issue throughout South Africa for the first time.<sup>39</sup>

The issue of the poor whites led to the growth of *bywoner* populist political action and debate, and suggests to the social historians a differentiation in the process of capital accumulation. Rather than an internal process of capital growth, the social historians argue that the financing of agricultural production came from land speculation, asset acquisition, and that marketing resources came from mining and foreign expenditure. Furthermore, Keegan asserts that "the capitalist transformation did not occur when the productive technology at the disposal of the landlords was essentially the same as that at the disposal of the tenants."<sup>40</sup>

The social historians, as did Morris, saw the role of the South African state as crucial to the transition in agricultural production. However, unlike the structuralist theory advocating a well-defined relationship between state and farmer, the social historians argue that the state did not complete the transition to agricultural production. Keegan concludes on the Orange Free State: "The failure of rural transformations (in capital class formation by the intrusion of advanced industrial capital) is a central index of underdevelopment in the late 20th century."<sup>41</sup> The Drought Resistance Investigation of 1923 concluded that "many a farmer is crippled at the very commencement of his activities. . . . All his available capital is locked up in land, so that fencing, dam making, boring for water and improvement of stock becomes impossible."<sup>42</sup>

### The Critique: Race and a Poverty of Theory<sup>43</sup>

The social historians explore and perceive history through the lens of human experience, and criticize structuralist historiography for relying on Euro-centric theories of interpretation. The common theme of the structuralist critique stresses the theoretical weakness of the social

history approach. As Martin Murray writes, "The social history perspective lacks an internally consistent and coherent, theoretical and epistemological foundation, to comprehend long term patterns of capital accumulation and capitalist development."<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Murray contends that "the methodological foundations of the social history approach are framed in such a way to presume the rejection of alternatives."<sup>45</sup>

Morris considers the fundamental weakness in the social history methodology to be the attempt to reduce the 'top down' view of history to the micro-level. He writes, "For there is no ordinary person in the street. . . . The 'views from below' are ultimately forced into idealized conceptions of the 'person in the street'—the 'masses'."<sup>46</sup>

Roger Deacon terms the theoretical weakness of the social history interpretation as the "poverty of theory."<sup>47</sup> The effects of the social historians' reluctance to create a theoretical framework are to "weaken any political or strategic impulse; it does not facilitate critical self-reflection; and it undermines the clarity of arguments and permits ill define concepts to obscure more than they reveal."<sup>48</sup>

Deacon analyzes the underlying concepts to social history scholarship, and concludes that although the social historians want to make a break from structuralist orthodoxies, they are "imprisoned by them."<sup>49</sup>

William Worger, reflecting on the proceedings of the University of Witwatersrand History Workshop, writes, "What theories, what conceptual categories? Apparently there are as yet none in the 'realist' approach, since at the end of their essay, Bozzoli and Delius argue that 'we have not reached the stage of making a statement on a larger scale'."<sup>50</sup>

The social historians, although taking considerable strides in unveiling the intimate details of everyday South African rural life, fail to develop a theoretical framework from their discoveries. The student of South African history faces a mine of rich and revealing testimonies, yet there does not exist a structural framework to put these resources into. This challenge still confronts the social historians.

## Conclusion

The debate between the structuralists and the social historians rests upon the extent of the theoretical understanding of agrarian transformations in the South African countryside. Yet seemingly unlike economic theories of micro and macro economics, the micro and macro (i. e., social history and structuralism) proponents of agrarian history do



not seek to fuse their debates into a stronger and concise interpretation of the transformation.

The first step in reanalyzing the agrarian transformation should begin with a distancing from the words "peasantization" and "proletarianization" which imply the inevitability of the transformation process. The process of analyzing the South African transformation must acknowledge that the dynamics of agricultural transition work in different directions, and that the structures of production do not change simultaneously with an intensification of production.<sup>51</sup>

The involvement of the state played an essential role in the transition of agricultural production, but the imposing nature of the state is limited in the extent to which it can completely change individual decision making and community involvement. The next step in analyzing the agrarian transformation should focus on the personal motives for individual and familial change and resistance. Historians need to explain the process of differentiation within African communities, and add to previous theories rather than disprove them. There is a need to understand the conditions that prompted behavior, the collective values of peer groups and communities, the values reflected in other social formations such as the family, religion, and local political structures.

History, although a study of the past, must look forward for refreshing and new techniques in analysis. Fredrick Cooper writes:

"Most academics seem to think that the highest accomplishment of scholarly work is for it to spawn a host of similar studies. But would it be a better compliment to the achievements of scholars who have looked deeply at African peasants if their successors did not so much follow in their footsteps as pioneer still newer pathways."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

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<sup>11</sup>Morris, *Op. Cit.*, p. 323.

<sup>12</sup>Martin Legassick, "Gold, Agriculture, and Secondary Industry in South Africa, 1885-1970: from Periphery to Sub-Metropole as a Forced Labor System," in *Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*, ed. Robert Palmer and Neil Parsons (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 181.

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<sup>18</sup>Tim Keegan, "The Origins of Agrarian Capitalism: A Reply," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15, 3, 1989, p. 668.

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<sup>23</sup>Charles Van Onselen, "Race and Class in the South African Countryside: Cultural Osmosis and Social Relations in the Sharecropping Economy of the Southwestern Transvaal," *American Historical Review*, 95, 1, 1990, p. 99.

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<sup>26</sup>Belinda Bozzoli, *The Women of Phokeng* (New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, 1991), p. 4.

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<sup>28</sup>Van Onselen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 106.

<sup>29</sup>Tim Keegan, "The Sharecropping Economy on the South African Highveld in the Early 20th Century," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 10, 2/3, 1983, p. 210.

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- <sup>32</sup>Keegan, "Crisis and Catharsis," *Op. Cit.*, p. 374.
- <sup>33</sup>Keegan, "South African Highveld," p. 218.
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- <sup>47</sup>Deacon, "Hegemony, Essentialism," p. 171.
- <sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 172.
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