

Organisation and Economic Change



A.MABIN (ed.). *Organisation and economic change*. Southern African Studies 5. Ravan Press: Johannesburg, 1989. 220 pp. Illus. R22,95 (exclusive). ISBN 0 86975 382 7.

During the past fifteen years thematically collected seminar and workshop papers have been published in a number of series. This volume, the fifth in the series Southern African Studies, represents papers selected under the very broad theme of organization and economic change. The aim was to focus on the neglected South African economic past. However, the introduction to this volume lacks a suitable theoretical framework which could have enhanced thematic unity. This was probably caused by the large diversity of the essays which cover nearly 170 years.

It should also be kept in mind that the seminars of the African Studies Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand (from which these papers originate), have not 'consciously been built around a topic, theme or theory' (p. vii). Obviously this has its own pitfalls. By collecting such divergent contributions which draw on the theories, methods and results of, for

example, socially and politically-orientated work, and presenting them as economic history, could be a disregard of the distinctive approach, nature, methodology and substance of this branch-discipline.

That man and society occupy centre-stage in nearly all the essays deserves credit. It is in sharp contrast with some economic historians at a number of South African universities, who, to a large extent, continue to be tied up with economic theory, exchange rates, banking, business and company histories, monetary policy, balance of payments and currencies. Approaches of this nature tend to serve the other extreme: history becomes a mere tool in the hands of economists who easily evict man and society to the periphery of their field of study.

The following essays have been included in this volume: Margaret Kinsman deals with the transformation of the Griqua Town captaincy (1804-1822); Alan Mabin elaborates on the economic conditions in the Cape Colony during the 1680s; Stephen Gelb traces the origins of the South African Reserve Bank (1914-1920); Bill Freund analyses the social character of secondary industry (1915-1945). These are followed by the contributions of Leslie Witz on the children of the Garment Workers' Union (1939-1948), the late Michael Crowder on the reaction to capitalist penetration in Botswana (1929-1959), and Chris Rogerson on the feeding of Johannesburg's Black workers (1945-1965). Finally Deborah Posel presents her essay on secondary industry, commerce and the state during the 1950s and early 1960s. With the exception of one or two all the essays bear evidence of painfully thorough and time-consuming primary research. The fact that not one of the essays is excessively long, making for reasonably light reading, is a further positive feature.

In the limited space of a review one could hardly elaborate on all the essays in depth. Attention will therefore only be focussed on two which deal with neglected regions of research, namely Botswana and the Northern Cape.

In his essay 'Resistance and accommodation to the penetration of the capitalist economy in South Africa: Tshekedi Khama and mining in Botswana, 1929-1959', Michael Crowder depicts the role played by Khama, first in the resistance to capitalist expansion and later in the foundation of Botswana's mining industry. Accepting mining only if it could also benefit the Tswana people, Khama contributed to the eventual economic revival of Botswana after independence. Apart from a sometimes uncritical acceptance and vindication of Khama's actions and viewpoints, Crowder apparently did not consult Kathleen Mulligan's 1974 thesis on the political activities of the London Missionary Society in Bechuanaland which devotes more than 130 pages to the mining question. He nevertheless demonstrates the peculiar relation between politics and economics during this period in Botswana.

Margaret Kinsman's essay entitled 'Popularists and patriarchs: the transformation of the captaincy at Griqua Town, 1804-1822', sheds new light on the rise of Andries Waterboer. According to the editor, Kinsman shows 'how the increasing adaption of cultivation in addition to pastoralism contributed to the transformation of Griqua society'. Those unfamiliar with Griqua history would find this essay particularly fascinating — especially the classic way in which a shift in the economic basis and inevitably also in production relations changed the structure of Griqua society. However, closer examination reveals numerous problems. Firstly, the author concedes that one can at best speculate about the poorer people's involvement in trade; yet in the next paragraph she accepts that profits from this trade became a powerful instrument in the hands of the poor to free themselves from the dominant pastoral society. The author also fails to prove beyond doubt that Waterboer was a 'rank and file' member of the poorer cultivators' class. The assumption that it was the poorer people who had turned to cultivation and emerged as small-scale farmers who opposed the old kapteyns, is debatable.

Particularly disturbing are some inaccuracies in Kinsman's source references. A case in point is the alleged reference by Robert Moffat to the 'families of over 700 former clients of Griqua aristocrats' (page 6), who supposedly reinforced the ranks of the cultivators — but this could not be verified in the British Parliamentary Paper which is given as the source of information (footnote 40). The fact that the historian has to rely to such an extent on speculation (compare Kinsman's frequent use of 'seem to have', 'probably', 'can assert', 'can argue' and 'suggest'), is perhaps a reason why pre-colonial history — the so-called forgotten factor — remains a neglected field of research. In spite of the claim that adaption to cultivation contributed to the transformation of Griqua society, the author has to admit that it was only 'an incomplete revolution', because twenty years later the Griqua once again reverted to pastoralism and eventually also to the patriarchal system.

These few points of criticism are not aimed at discouraging the future publication of collections of this kind. On the contrary, all new published material and interpretations should be supported since their publication is an important way of exposing each and every small piece of the big and sometimes mysterious jigsaw puzzle of the South African past.

P.H.R. SNYMAN
Human Sciences Research Council