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THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF MIGRATORY LABOUR — SOME CONCLUSIONS

By PHILIP MAYER

TO me there falls the task of summing up what are already two very admirable summaries in themselves, and of drawing conclusions where many illuminating conclusions have been drawn already. Let me begin by re-stating an argument which seems to run through Dr. Hellmann's and Mr. Blacking's papers alike: both suggest that what is doing harm to African men, women and children, and indirectly to this country as a whole, is not labour migration as such. Labour migration is a world-wide phenomenon and is socially neutral in itself. The social harm is in the way in which labour migration here is being manipulated, exploited, and artificially stimulated, to suit the supposed interests of the White population.

We White people, it appears, want to have efficient urban workers, and that means workers who have had time to get fully adjusted to town; but yet we do not want to recognize the African urban worker as a full fellow-citizen in our cities. This selfish paradox is the problem of the status of the urban African generally. It is not specifically the problem of labour migrancy.

Enforcement of rigid pattern

At this stage of today's meeting we are concerned with the social consequences of this abuse of the migrancy pattern, not with its ideological or political justification, or lack of justification. These have been dealt with by other speakers. I want to bring out three main points: (1) that labour migration as such could have good social consequences, not only bad ones; (2) that its good consequences will depend on there being freedom of choice which our present system denies; (3) that some Africans are able to fit willingly into our present system — even when it demands separation of families — while others most certainly are not. **The evil of the present system is that it forces the same rigid pattern on the willing and the unwilling alike.**

World-wide phenomenon

It is clear that labour migration was not invented in South Africa or by the present government; that it results from familiar economic processes; that it was not, in the first place, wilfully imposed on the African as an instrument of exploitation. Labour migration happens wherever in the world there is an imbalance in economic development, with some areas going ahead economically and industrially while other areas near them remain poor and undeveloped. From another angle, labour migration — regarded as a world-wide phenomenon — is a feature of the economic and social adjustment of less-developed populations in the face of economic changes. Any form of rapid change, and the social adjustment that it requires, is liable to draw conflicting comments from different observers. It may be perceived in terms of breakdown, corruption and suffering; or it may be perceived in terms of renewal, advance and exhilaration.

Labour migration in Africa in particular can be seen as a means whereby the tribesman is gradually drawn away from his limiting environment into the wider spheres of modern society and economy. Many people would see that as a good thing. On the other hand it can be seen also as a destructive force that undermines the security and human decency which tribal life can provide.

It has rightly been claimed that the migratory system can serve as a cushion shielding the primitive subsistence economy initially from the full force of the modern economic impact. The Fagan Commission report also spoke of a "bridge".

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He taught at the Universities of London and Cambridge, and was Government Sociologist in Kenya before he came to South Africa as Professor of Social Anthropology at Rhodes University.

In recent years he has made a special study of Urban Africans and of labour migration, and *inter alia* edited a series of three volumes called "Xhosa in Town", published in 1961/62/63 by the Oxford University Press. Dr. Mayer himself wrote the second volume, called "Townsmen and Tribesmen".

"Cushion" and "bridge" both seem good similes, when we want to look at the favourable aspects of migration. But both omit what may be the most important thing: **that migration ought ideally to act selectively.** It ought, insofar as it is a force for good, to be a filter: those who are ready to face life in modern industrial and urban conditions should pass through the filter, those who are not ready should be held and sent back. In terms of the individual, this selectivity depends on the freedom to choose, which is found when labour migrancy operates in a favourable setting.

Voluntary migrancy

A number of Africans in this country do manage to express their own choices within the framework of our migrancy system. These are the people who come to town more or less voluntarily to earn money; and who then go back voluntarily because they have remained what I have called "country-rooted". Town to them is a place to work, but home is in the country. Town life is, after all, an acquired taste. I personally have sympathy with anyone who is willing to quit the urban scene and return to the rolling hills and green valleys of Zululand or the Transkei — even without watertaps. There definitely still exists this type of conservative African peasant, to whom it seems a moral axiom that one **must** return *"home", and not "melt away in town" as the* Xhosa call it. Among conservative Xhosa this is a powerful cultural directive, sanctioned by the expectation of the senior kin and friends at home, by the consensus of the group of "home-boys" among whom one moves in town, and ultimately by the demands of the ancestral spirits.

Thus the African who lives in town but is spiritually, so to speak, a citizen of his home reserve, is not a complete invention of the Nationalist press. The invention is to suppose that all Africans are like this. As Dr. Hellmann has said, the type is probably much rarer in Johannesburg than in some of the coastal towns. And for those who do not belong to this type, it may be impossible to express one's own choice within the framework of our law.

Willing recruits to town

Africans who have had some school education do not usually feel internal moral pressures to return "home". They feel free, morally speaking, to prefer the life in town. Many will decide to go back to the country, if they have land rights in the reserves which would be lost by settling in town. But many are fully ready to pass through what I call the "migrancy filter". They would be willing recruits to town. As it is, however, they find an all-pervading insecurity which is enough to turn them against town after all. This insecurity is not entirely, but is largely, produced deliberately by our present system which is consciously aimed at discouraging permanent urban settlement.

Two patterns of migration

As Dr. Hellmann says, one can distinguish two patterns of migration — one of men alone, the other of men with their families. I think it is specifically important to remember that while African working men differ in their personal preferences for town or country, they differ also in their ideas about which is the proper place for a family. To some of them the separation of a family seems a lesser evil than the exposing of women and children to the influences of an urban environment. To others, family life in town seems right and desirable.

Many conservative tribal people in the Cape and Natal genuinely regard the country homestead as the only proper place for bringing up children, and the place where the highest duties of a wife will lie. They also genuinely feel that a man who takes his wife and child to town with him has trodden the first reprehensible step on the road to "melting away" entirely, and cutting off from rural ties for ever. That is why separation of families seems a lesser evil to people of this type. They are obeying a clear and overriding cultural directive; their women must not be brought to town, other than for short visits, and their children must not be reared in town.

SOME CONCLUSIONS (Cont.)

The more progressive people, or those with a higher standard of formal education (in the Cape they are generally called "School people") do not have this clear cultural directive. They are more likely to be swayed by straightforward economic considerations. To some it will seem good that the wife should migrate with her husband because she can earn money in town as well; or on the other hand it may seem uneconomic for families to be together in town, because in town the whole family have to subsist on earned income while in the country "they eat mealies which they plough themselves".

The filter of personal choice

The broad principle, I would say, is that compared with having men go to town by themselves, having wives and children go too is seen as potentially a far greater cultural break. It seems likely to trigger much deeper changes in habits, outlook and values. A man, on his own, is often seen to slip back quite happily into his old rustic ways after a period spent in town. For a couple, or a couple with children, this may not be easy at all. Often this is expressed by the semi-stereotyped remarks of country people, that when women go to town they get new ideas, become more independent, less submissive to husbands, in-laws and senior kinsmen, less observant of tribal norms generally. All these statements about the effects of town on women probably hold a great deal of truth, but of course different values can be attached to them. They are likely to seem morally good to a person of progressive outlook, morally bad to a solid conservative, and morally neutral to people who are thinking mainly in economic not social terms. **It is hard indeed on migrants that the filter of personal choice is not allowed to operate in this connection.**

Dr. Hellmann has quoted some figures relating to Johannesburg. A couple of years ago, she said, it was roughly estimated that 175,000 out of a total of 225,000 registered African men in Johannesburg qualified for urban residence, i.e. could stay in town, unless they were judged by the authorities to be workshy, undesirable or superfluous — and could obtain permits for their families to come to town. That is about 78%. If really 78% of all African men in Johannesburg had **full rights** in town — if they could freely choose whether to stay or go, and whether to bring in their families or not — then indeed the hardship and compulsion entailed by the system would be less *de facto* than it sounds in theory, and much less than is sometimes implied by critics. But the snag, of course, is that even these qualified urban residents are never fully secure in town; that they cannot go through any process analogous to the naturalization of a foreign resident, but must remain in a sense always technically foreign. And this applies with even more force to their families. For a woman to get the full benefit of her husband's qualification as an urban resident (under Section 10 of the Urban Areas Act) the woman herself must have been "ordinarily resident" in that town.

Temporary permits

What it comes down to is that if a country-born man marries a town-born woman he can be fairly sure of her being allowed to live with him in town, but much less so if he marries a girl from the reserves, or if he was married to one before he came to town. The correct interpretation of this clause is still controversial. At present the practice in Johannesburg seems to be to allow country-born wives in town to be with their qualified urban-resident husbands, but only on temporary permits that have to be renewed every three months.

The extended family

How much harm is actually done by the separation of families? This is not as cynical a question as it may sound. It is as well to realize that for many of the people concerned the ideal of "the family" is not exactly what the English, American or White South African person normally has in mind. Family ties are indeed exceedingly strong among conservative rural Africans, but not the ties of the isolated conjugal or nuclear family. Red-blanket Xhosa, for example, set tremendous store by the extended family comprising three generations; so much so that they would find it outrageous for a young husband to insist on taking his own wife and baby to town with him — an outrageous disruption of the family, meaning the three-generation family. The young husband does not call his wife "my wife", but "wife of my home"; in the early stages of marriage there is much more stress on her duties as a daughter-in-law than on her duties as a wife. Far from setting a value on conjugal closeness, the etiquette of this conservative section of the Xhosa actually forbids a young married man to be too intimate with his wife, or to appear to monopolize her, or to speak to her too often or with too undisguised affection.

In a broader perspective the essential thing is that man and woman have sharply-defined separate spheres of activity among many peasant peoples, and indeed many urban working classes. The separateness of their spheres is such that they do not have the same social and emotional dependence on one another as in the English or American conjugal family: the dependence is on a wider circle of kin. Among the Red Xhosa, too, there is traditionally a total prohibition of sexual intercourse for the young mother during the two years or so when she is still suckling her child. As for *the children, again the norms are different from* ours. Kin other than the parents are much more readily accepted as foster-parents, and much readier to act as such. It seems more "natural" to a Red Xhosa to let his children be brought up by grandparents, uncles and aunts in the country, than to take them into town so as to keep them with their own mother and father.

Coercive laws

I have been putting it to you that just as some Africans really prefer to go back to the country after working in town; so some really prefer the separation of their families as a lesser of two evils: they will choose to leave their wives in the country while they are in town themselves; or will prefer their children to remain with relatives in the country, or be sent there even if the wife is in town as well as the man himself. But let me emphasize two points once again:

(1) What is true of some Africans is not true of all; what I just said applies prinicipally to tribal conservatives, and to simple rustic people with little schooling. It may be that in the Cape these categories add up to a half of the population; but whether they are a half, or a little more, or a little less, there is unquestionably a *large section which feels otherwise, and which* is subjectively ready to pass over the migrancy bridge, or through the migrancy filter, into permanent urbanization. This latter section is subjected to definite hardships by the present system. It is a great pity that we do not know the proportions; in this sense we cannot assess the magnitude of the harm done by coercive regulations that divide families.

(2) However, apart from the actual number of cases involved, the mere fact that such coercive laws exist is reprehensible. It suggests all too clearly that the welfare or happiness of the people being regulated is not a prime object.

However many do prefer the system which entails the separation of their own families, I do not think it right for anyone to be **compelled** to undergo this separation, as against choosing it voluntarily: no more than I think it right for anyone to be **compelled** to leave a town as distinct from leaving it voluntarily.

Social evils

When I raised the question how much harm is done by separating families, I had also another point in mind. We have no right to assume that migrancy, and the separation which it entails, is completely and solely responsible for the well-known social evils of the urban townships: for adultery and sexual liaisons, for illegitimacy, for neglected children, for juvenile delinquency, and so forth. Up to a point every large city seems to have its slums where these things happen on a disproportionate scale. Given the fact that we have here a large town-dwelling African population which is respectable and law-abiding, and another element in the same townships which is not, how can we say that the abolition of migrancy alone transforms the latter type into the former? We do know that where life is poor and hopeless, where no escape seems possible from an extremely low social status, even non-migrant populations seem to be prey to the same evils. A study of poor families in British Guiana has suggested that one key factor is the inability of men to rise in the total social scale. Marriage goes by the board or becomes insignificant — so the argument runs — because the man, as husband and father, can contribute so little to the household group: he cannot bring them much of an income because his wages are kept low, he cannot bring them enhanced social status because he is not allowed to rise above a certain occupational and social level himself. Therefore he becomes a marginal figure in the context of the home and family, and women can feel that they do just as well to bear and rear children without a legitimate father. I am not saying that this hypothesis is fully proven even *for the field where it was first worked out,* but I think it can suggest lines of thought which may be profitable to us here. **There seems to be difficulty in maintaining the institutions of family and marriage anywhere, below the socio-economic level which is broadly called "respectable working class". If we want decent family standards we must therefore aim at this as the minimum socio-economic level — migrancy or no migrancy.**

(Continued overleaf)

SOME CONCLUSIONS (Cont.)

An objective view

It emerges from any discussion of labour migrancy how difficult it is to get an objective view. For those economists and urban employers who say that the overall aim is to hasten commitment to urban employment, migrancy is an archaism and an economic evil which ought to be abolished as soon as possible. For those politicians and journalists who say that the overall aim is to keep the towns White, and the African committed to his rural "heartland" migrancy is a present necessity and not by any means an unmitigated evil. We know all this; but what is the feeeling of the people prinicipally concerned — the Africans themselves, the migrant workers and their families? We may see the question coming to the fore soon in what was Northern Rhodesia. Will Zambia be able to do without influx control?

Need for humane control

You have heard the comparison drawn between African urbanization today, and the urbanization of England during the industrial revolution. In defence of influx control and all that goes with it, one might very well point out that the miseries of the English industrial revolution were due to too little control not too much — they flowed out of the *laissez-faire* attitudes of the day. I think we would all admit that some form of control could well be beneficial during this industrial revolution of our own. But we would have to add that control as such is not enough. Control to what purpose? in whose interest? and with whose welfare and happiness as its primary aim? Will anybody say that the controls we enforce here, at present as a part of the migrant labour policy, have as their primary aim the welfare and happiness of the worker himself? I think not; but if not, then what we need, I suggest, is not to abolish controls altogether, but to find a better and more humane system of controls whose hardships and benefits would be spread more fairly between the various classes and groups involved in our industrial situation.

> In practice, the effects of these harsh laws are tempered by a little mercy — and a good deal of inefficiency in administration.
>
> **Dr. Hellmann.**

MIGRATORY LABOUR AND THE URBAN AFRICAN

fluctuating population. Mobility of urban populations is universal today and would have continued to characterize a considerable section of the African population under any circumstances. But a permanent nucleus could have been brought into being more rapidly and more securely. The other factor is the deep antagonism which this whole network of discriminatory laws arouses and the tendency, certainly among urban youth, in their rejection of discriminatory laws, to reject the exercise of authority as such. When a people is forced to live under laws which are palpably discriminatory, the law itself falls into disrepute. What moral validity can be expected to attach to pass laws, to the laws of influx control? Which person, convicted under the Urban Areas Act and endorsed out, will feel that justice has been done? **To compel a community to live subject to unjust laws — and these laws are unjust in intent and in practice — is an open invitation to that community to make evasion of the law an approved social practice.**

A flawed society

I do not suggest that migratory labour and the insecure status of all African townsmen are in themselves the sole causes of family instability and the other forms of social maladjustment which are so evident in the urban African community. What I do suggest is that in this difficult period of transition, in which major economic, social and cultural changes have to be wrought, the measures the government imposes to prevent stabilization and perpetuate migratory labour accentuate and exacerbate all these difficulties. "If families are broken", says Monica Wilson, "the community reaps the whirlwind in disorder". Enforced migratory labour is a potent force breaking families. **When the state imposes laws which are totally unacceptable on moral and social grounds to the community to which they apply, the moral foundations of the community are undermined, and the whole society of which it forms part is flawed.**