

THE COMPOUND, THE RESERVE AND THE URBAN LOCATION

THE ESSENTIAL INSTITUTIONS OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN  
LABOUR EXPLOITATION

This paper is a contribution to a conference on the sociology of developing countries. It is delivered, however, by one of that growing number of sociologists who believe that much of what passes as the sociology of development is a part of the conscience-salving ideology of colonial exploitation. Like the comfortable and respectable sociology of ethnic minorities in the metropolitan countries themselves, the sociology of development claims to be policy-oriented. It assumes that those responsible for directing affairs in colonial contexts are motivated by a genuine desire to ensure increasing standards of wealth for the colonial people, just as the sociology of race relations or of ethnic minorities in the imperial metropolises posits a government which earnestly seeks the integration of minorities and the overcoming of all forms of racial discrimination. The view taken here is that these assumptions are about equally false, but, what is much more important, even if they were not, it is characteristic of the research programmes in which these assumptions are made, that no attempt is made to prove them.

More specifically, however, than this general dissociation of what I have to say from policy oriented research, is the reaction which I share to the sociology of development with A. G. Frank. I do not believe that there is any context of post-colonial or neo-colonial society in which what we are dealing with is solely an under-developed society. Colonial societies are societies which have been and are being systematically dedeveloped in the interests of the affluent and advanced capitalist world. This is true of most of Britain's former colonial territories in Africa. It is even more true of those territories which are subject to the direct exploitation of the settler territories, where responsibility for the management of the society and economy as a whole rests, not in distant legislatures and boardrooms, but with the local centres of settler power. Thus, far from the former so-called protectorates of Southern Africa now known as Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland being territories in which independent governments now

face the task of bringing their peasant populations into the market economy and into the whole swim of the modernizing process with the aid of a benevolent trustee who now provides aid where it is needed, what we actually see are poverty-stricken rural areas utterly dependent for their existence on the sale of their labour to the South African mines, left without any significant aid which might help them towards economic independence and completely circumscribed in the political and economic decisions they can take by the economic and military dominance exerted over them by the South African political system. Such situations exist in some degree in most of the dependent countries of the world. They even exist for the more backward countries and regions of Europe. But they rarely exist as clearly as they do in the Southern African dependencies, and there is, therefore, much that can be learned for the world at large from a study of the sociology of Botswana.

I am not exactly sure what sort of contribution I was expected to make to this symposium. I was in fact asked as one who was thought to be working on "dualism". Now I am not sure what that term means, but I imagine that it refers to situations in which there co-exist two economies and two social orders, one based upon the world market and on urban-industrial institutions including the production of cash crops in rural areas, and the other upon a subsistence world in which government and administration encounters the local populace mainly for law and order purposes, and through the agencies of the chieftainship and the kinship system. In fact, I know little about such situations, though there seemed to be the makings of one in parts of Sierra Leone where opportunities for advancement through the production of rice for the Freetown market were being neglected, during my stay in the territory, by cash-crop farmers. What my own work has been concerned with is the exploration of problems of race relations in what have come to be called "plural societies", and, even there, I have come to the conclusion that an understanding of the problems of these societies can only begin when one sees them in their colonial context and judges institutions in terms of the contribution which they make to attainment of the purposes of colonial exploitation or to those of the anti-colonial revolution. The dualism and pluralism which I detect in these societies is, therefore, the dualism or pluralism of goals which may be pursued by the participants and receive the sympathy of the observer. I, therefore,



follow Myrdal not simply in accepting the inevitability of value-oriented research. I follow him in asking that the ends to which policies and institutions may be deemed functional or dysfunctional should be brought into the open.

If, however, I feel that it is necessary to dissociate myself from the ideologies of development sociology, I find it equally necessary to disown what Mannheim would have called in his own strict sense of the term "utopias" borne of the anti-colonial revolution. I have much sympathy with these and indeed I happen to be prepared to give them whatever political support I can. But in my role as a sociologist my duty remains clear. I cannot pretend that the status quo of colonial society in Southern Africa looks destined for an early overthrow, and what I shall, therefore, be describing is a situation, in which a particular kind of labour exploitation, of a historically distinctive kind, takes place without too much difficulty, and, indeed, has within its institutional resources the means of making this exploitation even more effective and smoothly-functioning in the immediate and foreseeable future.

Naturally, in any discussion such as this we are dealing in ideal types. I do not really wish to deny that there are villages and aspects of the life of village people within South Africa itself, and in its neighbouring dependencies, which merit analysis in terms of models which have no reference to the mines of the Witwatersrand. Nor, on the other hand would I wish to deny that there is developing amongst the African labour force which migrates to the African towns, and amongst their peasant cousins, a revolutionary undertow which already drags the tide of South African history in directions other than those which the mineowners or the Afrikaner nationalists would wish. What I do wish to assert, however, is that in our usually tame professional sociology, which runs for cover when its conclusions do not fit easily into ideological patterns, what is missing is that aspect of a total sociological analysis which would derive from another model or ideal type, namely that of one of the most effective, if most inhumane systems of exploitation which the world has known. I propose, therefore, to develop this ideal type by analysing the three essential South African institutions of the compound, the reserve and the location in their dynamic unity, and, having pointed out how they may be seen to be

operated within South Africa's borders, to show how they may be thought of as setting the framework of the social and economic formation likely to be found in her imperial dependencies, whatever the superficial political forms which appear to operate there (e.g. Portuguese imperial rule, British protection or independent African rule).

One of the central mistakes made by Max Weber in his analysis of the essential institutions of capitalism, was his insistence that only free wage labour was ultimately compatible with its rational-calculating spirit. As he saw it, there were at least two major difficulties about the extreme alternative, namely, slavery. The first was that the continued supply of labour could not be assured. The second was that it was irrational from the point of view of a productive enterprise to have to maintain labour during times of market recession. What he did not pursue, however, was the possibility that other forms of unfree labour might emerge, given suitable background political conditions, to which these difficulties did not apply. It will be contended here that what emerged in South Africa through the conjunction of the overcrowded native reserve and the mining compound was a system of labour exploitation which was about as rational as it could be from the point of view of the exploiter.

The free wage labourer sells his labour by the week, or even by the hour or the minute. Attempts to win a longer period of guaranteed work have generally been held to be too restrictive in a free economy. On the other hand, the employer is not regarded as having any responsibility for the worker's family other than that of paying the worker himself his due wages. Any kind of guarantee of income in times of unemployment, therefore, has been left to the provision which the state is likely to make if it is subject to democratic pressure by workers' parties. The slave on the other hand is bought once and for all, for life and, so long as he is his master's property, the duty as well as the interest of the master is to keep him and his family alive so that he will not suffer either a loss of his existing capital or that which he is breeding for the future in the form of the slave's offspring.

The logic of slavery did, in fact, prove in the long run to



be incompatible with capitalism, but other forms of unfree labour lived on. Under the guise of humanitarianism, schemes were often worked out to apprentice the children of the emancipated slaves, as well as of conquered colonial peoples, farmers settled on land already inhabited and turned the existing inhabitants into labourers who were required to give labour service domestically and agriculturally, and the system of indentured labour was devised so that, at least for a period, the worker was as completely at the disposal of his master as was a slave.

All these labour forms, however, suffer from one great defect which makes them ultimately incompatible with the structure as well as with the spirit of capitalism. This is that they confuse the master's oikos and the family life of the worker with the operation of the capitalist enterprise. What is necessary, therefore, is an institution which reduces the period of "indentures" to such a length of time that the effective use of the worker's labour can be guaranteed, and which divorces the worker's role qua worker, both from the structure of the master's oikos, and from his own family life. This can be achieved if the worker is brought without his dependents to live in restriction in accommodation provided by the employer during the period of his contract. Thus, one finds that the basic form of labour in South Africa, at least in the mining industry, is compound labour. The compound is a kind of bachelor barracks in which workers retire when off shift to bunk beds in communal dormitories and receive their food in specially provided communal kitchens. A very high degree of rationality can be achieved under such circumstances. Enormous economies of scale can be made in what would otherwise be the worker's spending pattern, and he can be effectively sealed off from subversive forces which might lead to his trying to form unions to bargain over the price of his labour. The one great irrationality with which capitalist enterprises have to cope, namely the labour market, is, therefore, excluded. The cost of labour can, therefore, be not merely a precisely calculable, but a fixed cost.

There are, of course, difficulties in securing a labour supply which will accept these conditions and the difficulty becomes more acute when the political conditions immediately following conquest no longer exist. It is nonethe-

less worth noticing that despite the fact that its people enjoy the special protection of the United Nations Organization itself, every adult male citizen of Ovamboland in Namibia has had until recently to accept assignment to an employer merely by virtue of being an Ovambo. Moreover, one would be mistaken if one underestimates the political pressure brought to bear upon rural Africans to seek employment in the mines and on European farms. The most important forms of pressure, however, are not political but economic.

The term "reserve" has a curious ambiguity as it is used in the areas of white settlement in Africa. In theory it is supposed to refer to an area of land which has been reserved for native as opposed to settler occupation, thereby preventing the total expropriation of land by the settlers. That reserves do and must have this character will be made clear in a moment. But, if total expropriation has to be prevented, so has anything like the attainment of a supply of land necessary to support subsistence agriculture. Land must be kept in short supply and the worker must be forced into the money and wage earning economy. Thus, in South Africa the African reserves constitute only 15% of the total land even though the African people form 80% of the population; traditional communal landowning systems have been broken up so as to give tenure to some while turning the remainder into a landless proletariat, and a poll tax, introduced on an adult male per capita basis, has forced every family to require a money income. Similar systems were also introduced under settler pressure in Central and East Africa. This much, moreover, is not merely a matter of speculative ideal type construction. Here manifest and latent function as well as sheer intention are the same. The historical record shows that Rhodes in South Africa and his imitators in the North quite openly and explicitly introduced the kind of reserve system which would proletarianize the African.

But the function of reserve policy is not merely to act as a compulsion to peasants to become workers. It has also to ensure that the employers are not left with those responsibilities which, in the absence of a welfare state guaranteeing unemployment benefits and family support, they would have to assume. The reserve has to be, in theory at least, an economic and a social system which will supple-

ment wage earning employment as a means of support for the native. It is possible, of course, for employers to be crudely cynical about this and to talk, as the South African Chamber of Mines has done, of the great good fortune of the African who, unlike the British worker has, not one, but two sources of economic support, yet not, in fact, to take any steps whatever to see to it that the second source exists. But it is clearly also possible, given this background, for the whole system to be improved, reformed and rationalized so as to actually provide more resources for the African worker who returns to the rural area.

In fact, one of the things which the Nationalist government in South Africa has been quite consistent about doing has been to rationalize its reserve policy, both internally and so far as the dependencies beyond its boundaries are concerned. One of the first acts of the Nationalist party on its assumption of power was to set up a commission, the Tomlinson Commission, to investigate the possibility of a viable social system of apartheid. This notion had little to do with the segregation of black from white in any total sense. What it sought to do was to work out what steps would be necessary to achieve a situation in which by the year 2000 there would be so-called white areas of the country, in which not more than 50% of the population would be black, and black areas where the remainder of the population would live. The Commission reached the conclusion that this would only be possible if considerable sums of money were spent on rural rehabilitation and if the problem was looked at on more than a national basis so that the black areas to be taken into consideration would include what were then called Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland

At first it seemed as though the South African government would not go any way at all towards meeting these demands. But the succession to power by Dr. Verwoerd in the wake of Mr. Strydom probably involved a considerable shift of policy towards doctrinaire apartheid, or, as Afrikaners were to say, emphasising the positive aspects of apartheid. The notion of Bantu homelands began to loom large in Nationalist thinking, and, when Verwoerd was assassinated and Dr. Vorster undertook to "continue on that road along which Hendrik Verwoerd fell", it was this that he had in mind.

It is in fact not surprising that the Afrikaner Nationalist government, representative as it is of the poor white but free wage worker, should take action of this kind. Its interests lie in preventing at all costs any competition between cheap black free wage labour and its own. It could do this, of course, by totally restricting african entry to the cities, the mines and industry, but this is neither politically practicable, because it would mean the destruction of the economy, nor even advantageous, since the afrikaner worker has no desire to fill all the unskilled jobs himself. What he needs to do, therefore, is to make the compound and migrant labour system work, and this is something he can best do by turning into a reality the pretty theories of the Chamber of Mines.

Such a policy cannot, of course, be carried through without offence to other interests which the government must seek to represent. Industrialists, including the increasing numbers drawn from the Nationalists own ranks are likely to become concerned if the reserves become a featherbed encouraging african idleness, and the afrikaner farmer must rely to some extent upon a migrant labour force, which will have even less agreeable conditions than those pertaining in the mines, and which, therefore, requires economic pressure to be put on the african peasant. Thus, one might well expect splits of the kind which have developed in afrikaner Nationalism between the so-called "verligtes" and "verkrampes". The usual account of the origin of such differences is the emergence of more enlightened attitudes as afrikaner Nationalists succeed in business. A more complex hypothesis is suggested here.

What Vorster may be expected to do is, not to move towards some kind of liberalism in which african workers become more like their counterparts in Europe, with trade union and welfare rights. What he will do is what is suggested in the title of a recent and very perceptive study of South African politics, modernize racial domination. And that process of modernization will include not merely and probably not mainly rural development, a pretty hopeless task without massive investment anyway, but the increasing devolution of political authority for the management of the reserves on the Africans themselves. Once the range of choice available to independent african governments has been effectively restricted in practice, no great danger to the system



ensues from creating independent legislatures. Indeed the establishment of the reserves as Bantustans strengthens the whole system in many ways. It is also no accident that the South African government could tolerate an independent group of african states on her border and appear to extend to its own people the same rights as had been accorded by the British to the Tswana, the Sotho, and the Swazi. In due time similar policies could be applied in Malawi, and perhaps in Rhodesia, Zambia and Mozambique, if suitable african allies could be found. All of this simply serves to confirm how essential and how effective the rural reserve is within the South African system. For it is not simply a reserve of land set aside for the protected use of the native people. It is a reserve army of labour which has to be maintained as efficiently as possible at the minimum necessary cost so that it itself is cheaply available when and where required.

No doubt the ideal world of apartheid would be one in which all native people lived in reserves except during temporary periods when the able-bodied were summoned to live in urban compounds and do labour service. Something like this appears to have been the Ovambo system. But this cannot be simply achieved since the urban migration of families has been going on now for a very long time. Moreover, so long as uncostly arrangements can be made for providing the minimum necessary service for the unemployed and the families of workers in the towns, so that this cost does not fall on the employers, there are positive advantages in having a further reserve of labour, including female labour, readily at hand in the urban areas.

The existence of a residential community of families and other more complex households, however, does present certain difficulties to the system. Above all it raises the possibility of community-based political and trade union action. It is, therefore, imperative that the urban migrants should be subject to total control and perpetual scrutiny. As long ago as 1922 the Stallard Commission distinguished between the redundant and the non-redundant African, defining the latter, who was acceptable as an urban migrant as one who ministered to the wants of the white man or to the

documents proving his right to be in town. Even then he would be required to reside only in specially segregated areas of the city. In these areas, called "locations", a location superintendent responsible to the local authority ruled with absolute authority aided by a specially recruited municipal police force concerned with implementing the dozens of laws which in his everyday life the migrant, or his wife or his children might break. In the location a continuous programme of pass raids, liquor raids and other forms of harassment creates a total insecurity which effectively prevents any but completely clandestine political organisation. It is not too much to say that a family is always uncertain as to whether its male head will return at night because he might be arrested at work, while the male head may well return to find that his family are in the process of being deported to the rural areas.

The harassment and close scrutiny and supervision of inhabitants which goes on in the locations serves to supplement and strengthen the paternalistic controls exercised in the workplace. There the worker may be subject to Master and Servant legislation which makes it a criminal offence to leave his employment and, instead of being able to negotiate about his wages and conditions of work through a trade union he is required to present his complaints directly to a government official. The result is that any move towards a collective bargaining situation, such as exists and exists strongly amongst the white labour force, is effectively prevented.

The management of the semi-settled urban labour force, however, requires more than police control. Drains must be provided if disease is to be prevented and disease must be prevented because it spreads through domestic servants to white homes. Street lighting is essential to the effective prevention of crime. And beyond these more mundane material services it is also necessary to provide a minimum range of human and personal services to prevent unnecessary suffering and grievance which make for inefficiency. Yet there is a difficulty about providing these services. The native urbanites cannot afford them, and the white ratepayers, who are alone enfranchised, will not pay for them. Thus, so far as social services at least are concerned, an alternative source of income must be found. This is found through

the creation of a municipal monopoly in the brewing of native beer. The enforcement of this monopoly adds to the complexity of the policing measures, but the profits do provide the location superintendent with a budget which is his to command, and which cannot be cut by the white rate-payers. Thus, the central institution of the native location is the municipal beer hall, and, insofar as there are occasional and desperate political outbursts, the likelihood is that they will be directed against the beer-halls.

No-one who has been concerned with the administration of these locations would deny that there is a great range in the degree of efficiency or inefficiency with which they are administered. Those who are charged with their administration develop almost a craft skill in administering the various regulations effectively. But precisely because this is the case there is also great room here for improvement and reform. The lower level police may harrass the people unnecessarily and sadistically. They can be subject to control. The actual legislation which prevails in a particular location or nationally may be unnecessarily confusing, internally contradictory and intolerable. It can be rationalised and reformed. And, even within the existing framework, there is room for improvement of social services provided from the beerhall budget.

Improvements and rationalizations of this kind have, of course been carried out by the modernizing and reforming government of Dr. Vorster. As an efficient practitioner of apartheid, he has had to be firm about these reforms against the opposition of his more benighted colleagues at national and local level. But such reforms do not of themselves exhaust the strategies which he might use. The long term aim of apartheid in the urban areas is to relate it effectively to the policy of maintaining the reserves and Bantustans. Better than merely reforming the laws of urban life and using african clerks and police to administer them, is the goal of bringing the whole location system under the control of tribal authorities. To achieve this the first step is a segregation, not merely of black from white, but of tribe from tribe. To those who are mere pragmatists this might seem to be "apartheid gone mad". To the intelligent practitioner of the system it is the ultimate and essential cornerstone of the policy. The reserve



army of labour will exist not merely in the families whose life is split between the compounds and the reserves, but in the families and the community structures of the urban location. And the simplest way to govern it all is through unitary and compliant tribal authorities. Thus, the proposal that urban Africans should not have an urban franchise, but should share in electing their own tribal authorities is not an aberration. It represents the logic of the peculiar social system which is South African apartheid carried to its logical conclusion.

This is not the place to speculate about the long term viability of the policy of organising labour exploitation in terms of racial supremacy and apartheid. It should, however, be noticed that neither white racial supremacy nor the mere fact of segregation were the invention of the present Nationalist government. They were established residentially, industrially and politically by the South African Party government of Botha and Smuts and the United Party governments of Hertzog and Smuts. Indeed, one might go further back from this and say that they were established in their essentials as soon as the mining industry was established by Cecil Rhodes. What the Nationalist governments of Verwoerd and Vorster have done, however, is to perfect the essential institutions of the system. In the first place they were arrived at pragmatically and in a way which made them extremely vulnerable to political and economic change. The modernizing Nationalists have merely understood the logic of the system and carried it through to its conclusions. It is little wonder that they have won the grudging support of their white political opponents and the admiration of overseas investors.

To point to these hard facts is by no means to join in the chorus of european hallelujahs at the success of white supremacy in one part of the dark continent. That one would do, only if one rejoiced at the fact of racial domination, or if one judged South Africa's economic system by the profits which it yielded. On the other hand, the sociological problem which this sets for those who wish to work for the revolution is how that revolution will come about. Clearly, it cannot follow the classic Marxist pattern of a revolution led by the urbanized african workers. Indeed, so far as the unionized workers are concerned the main thing to be noted about them is that they are white,

and that they will be active in their support of an overall system which brings them great material benefits. What is far more likely is that the revolution will develop in the countryside and in the residential urban locations, involving attacks on compliant tribal chiefs, police, clerks and beerhall managers, together with any other Africans who collaborate in modernizing the system. And once such compliance has been prevented, the way will be opened to the effective withdrawal of african labour and the commencement of guerilla activity in reserves and locations alike. Once again it should be pointed out, however, that we are not making suggestions here as to what should be done, let alone recommending how racial peace might be established in South Africa. It is not the sociologist's task to suggest solutions to political problems. What he has to do is to assess the situation and suggest the likely course of events. We suggest here that, although the skill of Dr. Vorster has been successfully applied in breaking legal and illegal opposition alike, the possibility of revolution remains, but not in anything like a classical european form and not even perhaps in one of the forms which have been successful in China, Algeria and Cuba. A unique labour system in a highly successful capitalist society will produce its own revolutionary forms.

All of this may, of course, seem rather irrelevant to a conference on the sociology of development as that notion is normally understood. What I have to say about that is simply that what is going on in South Africa is a highly successful form of development, although not one which will appeal much to those who equate the sociology of development with some kind of good works.

So far as the sub-heading under which this paper is given - that of "dualism" - is concerned the implications are much clearer. We see dualism in Southern Africa, only if we ignore the political and economic realities and the nature of the developmental process. It is no accident that development in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland proceeds but slowly and with meagre capital resources. What the total system of which it is part demands is that it should guarantee sufficient poverty to ensure a labour supply for the mines and sufficient development to provide a "homeland" which can act as a substitute for a social security and welfare system. The only real accident would be if one of

the dependencies were to have a windfall in the form of the discovery of hidden resources which would make them partially independent. This might mean the emergence in the South of another Zambia, and if that were to happen the sociology of development might be interestingly combined with a political sociology, which explored the institutional means whereby such wealth might be independently developed. In the absence of this situation, however, many of the earnest enquiries of the development sociologist turn out to be purely ideological. This is particularly true in the Southern African case, but that case may itself offer us pointers to the way in which we might analyse colonial exploitation situations of a more subtle kind.