

A REVIEW OF SOME 'POPULAR' ANTHROPOLOGICAL
 APPROACHES TO THE UNDERSTANDING
 OF BLACK WORKERS

by David Webster

The purpose of this review is to evaluate the kind of material an employer of black labour might turn to for information when trying to deepen his understanding of his work force. Unfortunately, academic anthropologists seldom write for the general public and, for many years now, the complicated ethics of applied anthropology have discouraged many social anthropologists from indulging in work that could be manipulated against its subjects. Almost by default then, the field has been left open for popular writers such as E. Raymond Silberbauer and Dr Peter Becker. Neither is a social anthropologist, but their subject-matter falls within the ambit of that discipline, and both the general public and industry have come to regard them as experts in African 'problems'.

Silberbauer is the less-known to the general public, but his impact on industry, especially mining, is the greater. He is the Director of the Bantu Wage and Productivity Association and is a consultant on personnel problems relating to blacks; his services are widely used, and he has widely-read publications such as *The African You Work With* (1967) and *Understanding and Motivating the Bantu Worker; a Productivity Book*.

His influence is spread by lectures and handouts with titles such as, 'General limits on how to handle Bantu' and '50 things to do with Bantu workers' (sic). Recently Goldfields of South Africa produced a film *A World of Difference*, with Silberbauer as consultant on the script. The film attempts to show the large cultural gap between black and white and is an appeal for greater understanding on the part of the white supervisors in dealing with black labourers.

Peter Becker's recent book, *Tribe to Township* (1974) describes him as an 'internationally acclaimed expert on African customs, beliefs, history and languages'. Well-known to the general public through newspaper articles and popular books on African history and anthropology, he does not write specifically on

labour problems, but deals with some in a section of the abovementioned book. Becker works in an advertising agency, and is consulted by industry on African affairs.

The two writers operate from what appears to be a sympathetic, but paternal 'liberal' position, from which they genuinely want greater understanding of blacks by whites, but their strategies are different. Becker demonstrates 'tribal' wisdom, and that it shouldn't be underrated, while Silberbauer, speaking from within the work context, tries to show that blacks are 'different' and special steps must be taken to allow for these differences. Both seem to think that the panacea for all labour problems is communication and understanding - improve that, and worker discontent will disappear. There is no doubt that in our prejudiced and race-overlaid society there is much room for improvement in communication, but our labour problems run much deeper than this superficial analysis can expose.

Analytically, the two writers are poverty-stricken. They lack any kind of theoretical framework which could lend strength to their arguments, and their presentation is consequently episodic, anecdotal, and relies entirely on apt illustration for the points being made. Silberbauer often prefaces his little homilies on worker communication by reference to 'the African'. Becker veers wildly from personal anecdote to sweeping generalization; one wonders just how much weight one can attach to their assertions.

The most serious charge that can be levelled against them, and one which goes to the heart of the matter, is that neither is prepared to face the dominant facts of South Africa's political and socio-economic life: that the country is subject to the policy of separate development and, in earlier times was subject to a system which was not so openly coercive, but was nevertheless exploitative. To be black in South Africa means one is powerless, subject to influx control, job reservation, inadequate housing and health facilities and the lack of trade union representation. All these factors (and more) affect black workers in a fundamental way, and must be

considered when judging his productivity and efficiency.

Neither Becker nor Silberbauer analyses the political economy in which black labour is located. The latter particularly deals with migrant labourers, yet fails to come to grips with the reasons why labour is forced to migrate. They use the facile technique of imputing individual motivation, but as Gugler (1968) and other writers have shown, such explanations are generally of the 'last straw' type - there are usually a multiplicity of reasons for a decision to migrate; the economic underlies them all.

Migrants are particularly disadvantaged: their position is tenuous, so they are less committed to their jobs than permanent workers. They are unskilled because the employers do not want to invest much in training labour which may not return to them. Their lack of skills means that they are often called on to do the most arduous, dangerous, dirty or boring jobs, often at humiliatingly low wages. Migrants are often forced to live in hostels, e.g. mining compounds, which provide artificial and disorienting social conditions, with lack of privacy, uncomfortable bedding, and lack of women. Such conditions must affect the worker in the workplace, at a fundamentally deeper level than mere communication with his white supervisors.

Taking a closer look at the work of firstly, Silberbauer, we find an overweening paternalism. He gives the impression of African workers being hide-bound by custom, which the employer should accept with patience and fortitude. One piece of advice offered is for supervisors to be eventempered because, 'The African (sic) is constantly on the look-out for the influence of spirits. Moodiness in the supervisor may puzzle and worry the worker because it may seem to be due to the influence of an evil spirit' (1967, no. 49).

The paternalism shows through in most of Silberbauer's work, perhaps nowhere as explicitly as in no. 34, where he claims, 'An African said: "We put the White supervisor in place of our father"', followed by an injunction to conduct oneself with the serious

demeanour befitting a father, and not to 'lark about' since 'familiarity breeds contempt'. Most black workers would be offended by such a caricature of their attitudes. In homily no. 63, and in the film *A World of Difference*, he offers an insight which can only be based on ignorance: 'The migrant African who comes to work in town is not accustomed to doors and the ritual of knocking and waiting for an answer'. Rural blacks *do* have doors on their houses/huts; indeed, his own film shows a Venda village with every hut with tightly closed doors.

Silberbauer perpetuates (usually with the best of intentions) ignorant racial and ethnic stereotypes of the sort that are drummed out of every first year anthropology student, such as, 'Compared with the other Black peoples of Africa, the Southern Africans have perhaps the greatest sense of humour' (no. 33) and 'Often the Africans are colour-blind but can't tell you because they have never seen colour' (no.45). The latter point no doubt arises from a superficial understanding of African cultures. The fact is that, in most vernacular terminologies, there is one term for, say, the colours red, orange and yellow. This does not mean that Africans are colour blind, for they are perfectly capable of distinguishing the different colours; it is just that, in their culture it is not of great significance to do so.

There are times, however, when Silberbauer displays real insight and understanding of the problems faced by black workers. He talks of the inadequate diet of many workers, poor housing, the need for dignity and security, and the difficulties of social change. He calls for sympathy for the plight of a worker who may have to set out for work before 4 a.m. and return after dark (no. 61). But, regrettably, such accurate assessments are all too rare, and one finds old stereotypes reinforced, or replaced by a new set of inaccurate ones.

Silberbauer is most culpable when he persists in insulting the intelligence of blacks in general, and workers in particular. He denies the African's ability to work with abstract concepts or numbers (no.62 and 71), urges one to speak slowly and to get the worker to repeat instructions given him (no.76).

His ethnocentrism and supremacist views are exemplified by his assertion that blacks in town may lose their 'moral compass' and need to be shown a 'firm moral example' (no. 65). But let Silberbauer's own words in a dictum that seems central to his understanding display his attitudes:

'The urban Africans are living betwixt feudal tribalism (sic) and the present industrial age. They are in a no-man's land and they need help to make a landing on the beaches of intellect and morality of the modern world' (no. 74)

Disillusioned with Silberbauer's ability to deepen our knowledge of black workers, let us turn our attention to the work of Peter Becker, who purports to be an authority on Africans. Of all his work, the recent *Tribe to Township* touches most on the areas of interest here: migrant labour, urban blacks, attitudes to work, and black-white relationships. Unfortunately, the work is characterized by superficiality and simple-minded abstraction. Not for nothing is he sometimes referred to as 'the Tretchikoff of anthropology'.

A chapter entitled 'Black meet White' dismisses in the page-and-a-half format that characterizes most chapters in this book, the problem of black-white confrontation in early S.A. The border wars, the bloody battles that took place between the black inhabitants and their white adversaries who appropriated their land, are rendered thus:

'Mamba-tongued lightning strokes the skies, and the thunder we hear is the thunder of sour smelling smoke and of gunfire mingled with the rumble of charging feet, the rattle of assegai blades on oxhide shields and the droning throats of warriors black, befeathered and befurred'. (pp. 123-4)

Such a glib gloss over the complexities of black-white war-fare in the early years of South Africa does not even scratch the surface of the complexity that lies beneath it. How did the wars end? Who won, and what was the cost in terms of black

dispossession and oppression? Becker sidesteps this thorny one as if it wasn't there - his description is empty of analysis and descends to facile pathos:

'But war begets war and as the years move on the struggles continue between fighting men... we call out loud, 'Will this not end?'' (p. 124)

With astonishing naivete, Becker resorts to his thunder metaphor to precipitate the reader into his understanding of the origins of migrant labour, begging the whole question of the relationship between border wars and the proletarianization of rural blacks. But let Becker speak for himself:

'And it (the warfare) does end, for now the thunder we discern is not preceded by lightning, for it is the thunder of the mining machines mingled with the voices of work-giving White men calling upon all to replace their weapons of slaughter with the tools of labour. So we move on in retrospect observing the birth and growth of market villages, factory towns and mining cities. And the veld, we observe, has become patterned like a spider's web, with footpaths trodden by black men answering the white work-giver's beckoning finger.' (p. 124)

As readers of perceptive analysts such as Colin Bundy (1972) and Arrighi (1973) are aware, the 'beckoning finger' of the 'White work-giver' was more often than not a mailed fist, sometimes disguised with kid gloves. Taxation, land appropriation (culminating in the 1913 Land Act, which finally allocated only 13% of South Africa's land to Blacks), the forming of co-operatives by White farmers (to keep out black competition), the lack of infrastructure (to facilitate the marketing of black peasant's surplus produce) and other more subtle coercive measures, all had the cumulative effect of forcing the black man into the service of white industrialists and farmers. Becker's facile gloss of what is a subtle and complex interaction of forces is not merely obfuscation, it is blatant distortion of the evidence.

Becker persists with the view that migrant labour is undertaken from purely voluntary motivation of individuals who perceive market opportunities opening up before them. The Great Depression affected all South Africans, not least the migrant workers, who were laid off in their thousands, causing great hardship. The Second World War provided these workers with an opportunity to regain their employment and ameliorate their rural poverty. Again, let Becker's purple prose give his interpretation:

'In 1939, when suddenly the world was ignited with the flames of battle, tribal South Africa interpreted the smoke-filled skies as summoning all able-bodied men to cities now bustling with activities of war. So hordes of potential workers, some accompanied by their loved ones, took leave of childhood friends and haunts, and headed zestfully for... (urban areas)... where in days gone by not a few had worked as mining men. Hearts throbbed with happy expectation. A new era was about to dawn.' (p. 125)

A new era indeed - the boom of the war years ended for blacks when white soldiers returned from the war to find many of their jobs had been taken. Industrial unrest ensued, and Afrikaans-speaking labour and capital combined to produce the Nationalist victory of 1948, with the most rigid and anti-black coercive policies yet employed in South Africa. But Becker sees only optimism in the situation, and describes the idyllic city of Soweto, replacing the sprawling slums, 'with amenities hitherto undreamed of' (p. 125). Surely not even Soweto's most enthusiastic propagandists would agree with such claims.

The reader who seeks a deeper understanding of relationships in the workplace, especially with regard to migrant labour, will be met with an uncritical paean of praise for the employers that borders on propaganda: 'Our mining industry leads the field in fostering the soundest race relations... The facilities for its six hundred thousand Black workers are magnificent to say the least' (p. 147). Soundest race relations? When, in the year preceding the publication of his book, black miners were killed

in compound confrontations, which were described as inter-ethnic 'faction fights' (*South African Outlook* April 1975, p.50). Thousands of black miners especially those who live in the older compounds, like City Deep or Crown Mines, would also take issue with him on the subject of 'magnificent conditions', where men still sleep, twenty to a room, on concrete bunks. Admittedly, conditions are improving, and the poverty-level wages (a factor Becker chooses not to discuss) are rising. Points such as these show up disingenuous claims like, 'The hostels are furnished as only those who have worked before in homeland hotels have seen' (p. 147). This is either a comment on the number of hostels Becker has himself seen, or a searing indictment on homeland hotels.

In a country where black workers are denied the legal right to be represented by trade unions, and many are inadequately represented by works and liaison committees, it would be interesting to see what Becker says about worker attitudes to their employers and employment. It seems he feels constrained to explain away African indolence. He and Silberbauer resort to the image of tribal man tilling fields and reaping by the work party system, where time is of no importance and effort is a personal matter, there being no supervision. Their argument is that these 'tribal workers' had difficulty in adjusting to the white man's ways, and particularly his work patterns, and that they still do (p. 128).

There is an underlying tone to this type of argument which, at best, can be seen as ethnocentrism and, at worst, racism. Blacks are not as unintelligent as this picture he paints of them; as Max Gluckman argues, 'a miner is a miner' and should be seen as such. A black, as much as any other person, is adaptable, and finds himself subject to the same social and physical environment in the town or workplace, as any other worker, and responds to it in terms of its own demands. If many blacks (especially migrants) are considered indolent or lazy, perhaps one should look to their work situation, examine their wages and, if these are unsatisfactory (a fairly safe bet), is there not a strong case to be made for

the fact that these men are consciously withholding their effort from their employer, whom they perceive as exploiting them? This is a common low-level strategy used by workers in situations where protest is not allowed in an organised and legitimized (in the eyes of the worker) form.

Becker's lack of an analytical framework is nowhere more glaring than when he tries to account for urbanization/westernization/social change. He again accounts for all of them in terms of the 'individual choice' argument, which ignores the fact that there are governments, economic conditions and socio-cultural changes over which the individual has no control. His recourse is to a metaphor again: westernization/urbanization should be seen as a many-runged ladder, (pp. 135-7) the upper rungs of which represent the most urbanized (civilized?). The ethnocentrism of this view is apparent - 'tribal' life is a lower form of society, and that 'western', urban ideals are the pinnacle of achievement.

CONCLUSION

Both Becker and Silberbauer give the impression that black workers have only very recently been exposed to western culture and its technology. This impression is gained from their emphasis on the immense leap a black worker has to make from his cultural background to conditions at work. Both writers are undoubtedly operating from a sympathetic and at times liberal point of view, but they achieve an unfortunate and erroneous impression of a kind of pristine tribal life - rural, untouched - on the one hand, and westernization, urbanization and industrial work on the other.

The truth of the matter is that blacks have been exposed to 'westernization' for centuries, and many urban blacks are now fifth generation or more. Neither writer raises the problem of apartheid and its constraints, nor do they have any framework which would deepen their analysis. The homelands, for example, are an integral part of South Africa's political economy; they are the underdeveloped periphery to the industrial complex, acting as labour reserves. The apartheid laws, though perhaps

not as keenly felt, are ubiquitous in the homelands, and the effects of the South African economy are, if anything, more keenly felt in the rural areas, poverty-stricken as they are. Becker's 'tribal' garden of Eden misleads; if one wishes to understand one's worker, he must be seen as a total man - the problems he faces at home are not separable from his performance in the workplace.

But whom can one turn to in the anthropological field for the kind of insights into black workers that these two authors so signally fail to provide? The answer is complicated by the fact that the question itself is based on racist premises. Why should a black worker be so different from any other worker? Perhaps if he were not treated as a 'problem' *a priori*, he might not be one. Black workers should be treated as any other worker, and if one wants insight into his problems, general texts on labour should be consulted. Berger and Mohr's *A Seventh Man* is as applicable to South African migrant labour as to the migrants of western Europe it deals with. Finally, if one persists in wanting anthropological approaches to labour problems in Africa, one could do worse than consult Buraway's *The Colour of Class*, Kapferer's *Strategy and Transaction in an African Factory*, and Epstein's *Politics in an Urban African Community*.

David Webster
University of the Witwatersrand
Department of Social Anthropology

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