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Ruth First, *Black Gold: The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1983, £30.00, xxxi + 256pp.

Anyone who knew her must inevitably think of the author and her assassination while reading and assessing this posthumously published text. But equally anyone who knew her would also be aware that the tribute she would value most would be a clear-headed, unsentimental evaluation of the work itself.

One might perhaps be excused one word before attempting that, for this last of her books, a study of the flow of migrant labour to the mines of South Africa and the impact on the source areas in southern Mozambique, deserves to be situated briefly in relation to her life's work. The subject matter and the approach, based on many and extensive interviews with returned miners and with the peasantry at large, are very much in the mainstream of the concerns of sociological fieldwork. This carefully crafted investigation marks yet another string to a remarkably wide-ranging opus of work, which had earlier included biography (of Olive Scheiner), a masterly political analysis of the military in African politics, a political economy

of Libya, an exposé of multinational investment in South Africa, and a memorable prison memoir. Yet at the same time it was a measure of the consistency of the commitments of a varied professional life as academic, activist, writer – a return to her concerns of the 1950s, the penetrating journalistic investigations into the exploitation of black labour.

Part I of the book offers a history of the migration – the extent and direction of the flows and the mechanisms of recruitment – but in the course of it shows how this pattern became a central element in the socio-political structures of Southern Africa: in the formal agreements between South Africa and the colonial state in Mozambique, and in the whole way of life of the people of its southern districts. Thus migrant labour is explained not as an act of will by a host of migrant workers, rather ‘eight decades of the system of migrant labour have made it a structural necessity for rural producers living under colonialism’ (pp. 3–4).

The second part then focuses on the miners as a work force. The study shows that migration was not just undertaken by the few nor was it a matter of going to ‘Joni’ (Johannesburg) once or twice to get a stake, for marriage payment (*lobola*), to buy a house, piece of equipment or field. The facts were that there was ‘hardly a man of working age who had never worked a mine contract’ (p. 183); that this had been going on for a century – the investigators interviewed returned miners who were the grandsons of migrants; that most men worked several, long contracts – ‘only about one quarter of the total labour force interviewed had spent less than 30% of their active working life in the mines’. Detailed case histories vividly bring out what it means to work nineteen contracts of a year to year and a half over a forty year period, to live twenty to a room in a dormitory where the lights are on all the time. These graphic stories are given factual depth by detailed lists of the wages of the contracts, the savings brought home each time and what they went on. And what such work histories meant at the level of culture and consciousness is imaginatively illustrated by intertwining work songs, recruitment songs and the widows’ laments (collected by Alpheus Menghazi) into the text.

But the pattern has changed since the first part of the 1970s. 1975 was in fact the peak year for recruitment of Mozambique miners – a total of 115,000 that year of whom almost 20,000 were ‘novices’ going on their first contract. Already the unrestricted rise in the price of gold and the technical innovations the mining houses were able to make were leading to a more skilled labour force and significant wage rises for the first time this century. But before these improved conditions and wages could be enjoyed for long the mining houses shifted their recruitment policies, in part in response to the independence of Mozambique, away from the use of foreign labour, which had constituted 80% of the work force in 1970. The consequence has been some continuing and better-paid opportunities for a few miners, though restricted through the issuing of now much-prized re-employment certificates, but no new openings for the next generation of would-be novices. The overall recruitment target for Mozambique, fixed by the Chamber of Mines, seems to have stuck at 30,000 in the late 1970s.

This catastrophic curtailment of earning opportunities for the males of a rural population totally geared to this pattern of life is charted in Part III, but not before the structural impact of the preceding decades of migration on the peasant economy are explored. The consequence of the absence at any one time of what was, a generation ago, almost a third of the able-bodied adult males had of course an enormous impact on the agricultural economy and society of the southern provinces. But it was a complex interaction. Even if migration to the mines was the single most significant influence in the south of Mozambique, its precise effects are traced, in Part III, by following the intricate interplay between this and other effects of colonialism and the indigenous social formation. Among the identified consequences of migration are the monetization of *lobola* and the weakening of the extended family. Unmitigated by any provision of education, health or other social benefits to speak of, the heavy hand of Portuguese colonialism is analysed in terms of three other, marked imperatives in the region.

It was a part of the country given over to settler agriculture, which meant that it

peasantry not only lost the best land but some of them were incorporated as a resident serf population in a system of *latifundario*. The peasants of other areas were also subject to forced labour – *chibalo* – which was enforced by the state to provide internal labour, even more badly paid and harshly treated than mine labour. *Chibalo* is viewed systemically, its avoidance being one of the most effective recruiting mechanisms for the mines. But the penetration of the commodity economy into the southern provinces took a third form in the inter-war period with the introduction of enforced peasant cropping of minimum acreages of cotton and rice. The mining absences were not only the most extensive form of enforced labour export but the length of the contract, up to 18 months, meant absences for the whole of the agricultural cycle. So, deprived of labour and land, the agricultural economy was impoverished – but, as area case studies show, in a manner that differed widely depending on an area's fertility, number of settlers, proximity to the recruiting centres and to markets.

The book also points to migration's contradictory impact on agriculture in that it was, for the fortunate few in recent years especially, a means of some limited accumulation – of ploughs, grain mills and other farm equipment as well as houses and shops. The analysis also qualifies the simplistic picture of general impoverishment by identifying a stratification of the peasantry, largely as a result of differential access to this kind of accumulation through migrancy, into middle and poor peasants.

This structural independence of migrancy and peasant agriculture has had profound consequences in the post-Independence period when the openings in mining have been curtailed but also the exodus of the Portuguese has drastically reduced employment in settler agriculture and in the towns. This is one of the policy issues with which the final part of the book seeks to deal – how to respond to an inherited situation where more Mozambicans are employed outside the country – in South Africa and Zimbabwe – than inside, making it doubly difficult to come up with an alternative to migrancy. But this planning problem is seen by the study as related with the analytical issue

of defining the social character of the migrants. In the final section, Ruth First explored what it means to characterize the miners as a class of 'worker-peasants', who 'exchange their labour power for wages', indeed cannot 'reproduce their households and their agricultural plots without spells of wage work', have been 'part of a concentrated labour force, subject to industrial work discipline, exercising work skills, acquiring labour unity and organization', yet have still experienced only 'an incomplete and impermanent proletarianization' still embedded in a peasant production, which in turn 'is subordinated to and shaped by the dominant capitalist mode of production', and with 'a peasant differentiation between a middle and a poor peasantry'. An insightful analysis of a complex social category that can only be reduced to a simple class identity by planners, academics or politicians at their peril.

The book accomplishes its descriptive tasks well on the whole, with only minor instances of uncharacteristic lack of clarity – perhaps the final editing of the text had not been done before she died? The conceptualization is suitably nuanced. The final attempt to explore alternative futures is necessarily brief, though there are some telling points made about how to go about forming agricultural co-operatives on a voluntary self-reliant basis that need to be taken on board by Mozambique. One wonders too whether a more flexible strategy allowing a continuation in a different form of migrant labour would not make sense rather than to pose the stark alternative of reintegration of this work force into agriculture or as part of industrialization? But all in all the work is an epitaph any scholar could be proud of.

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