

Lis Lange, *White, Poor and Angry: white working class families in Johannesburg*

Lucien van der Walt

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LANGE, LIS. van der Walt – Review of Lange ‘White, Poor and Angry’ [Race and representation.] Ashgate, Aldershot [etc.] 2003. viii, 186 pp. £45.00.

Lis Lange provides that rarity in African studies: a monograph on the social history of white yet working-class South Africans. This nuanced study looks at the emergence, social conditions, and social and political responses of the white working class in its formative period: roughly from 1890, when the new Witwatersrand mining industry came under the control of the monopoly capitalists christened “Randlords,” to the 1922 general strike and armed uprising that famously demanded “Workers of the World Unite and Fight for a White South Africa”.

While the 1922 Rand Revolt must be understood as part of an international wave of popular insurgency that swept up from Ireland and Mexico in 1916, and crashed down in Bulgaria and Germany in 1923, its particularities cannot be fully grasped without the details of daily life provided by writers such as Lange, who pays particular attention to the role of family, housing, and state policy in shaping white workers’ identities and communities, which she stresses were not always “clearly defined, homogenous and coherently expressed” (p. 166). Lange’s focus is Johannesburg, the heart of the Witwatersrand complex. Beginning as a diggers’ tent city in 1886, the city had over 82,000 white inhabitants by 1904, out of a population of 155,462, spread over 82 miles (pp. 12,39,84). Many were drawn from abroad by the lure of good wages and “cheap steamship travel” (p. 13); others were local Afrikaners proletarianized by changes in rural South Africa. Settled white working-class communities were soon evident – partly a function of growing confidence in the future of the mines – with 80.16 per cent of whites overall living in families by 1904 (p. 12), although, even eight years later, 49.31 per cent of white miners were unmarried (p. 79).

While South Africa was a “racially organized colonial society” (p. 64), and cheap, unfree, migrant African labour formed the bedrock of the mining industry, conditions for the white working class were generally grim. Residential land was controlled by the great mining houses, which engaged in speculation and rack-renting; the Johannesburg municipality, proclaimed in 1897, lacked revenues and power; ongoing instability in the dominant mining sector expressed itself in waves of lay-offs and industrial contractions, impacting heavily on a white working class often resident in unsanitary, overcrowded, and multiracial slums, and facing the highest living costs

in the country; underground white miners faced the “White Death”, silicosis, affecting nearly 20 per cent at times (see especially pp. 50-58, 102-110, 165). Further, there was a high rate of unemployment and underemployment amongst lower-waged, less skilled whites: officials attributed this “poor white” problem to irrational prejudices against manual labour, but it resulted equally from employer preferences for cheaper Africans (pp. 146-149). If conditions were not necessarily comparable to the very worst in Europe (p. 58, but cf. p. 89), they were often dire, as Lange shows through statistics and very vivid reconstructions of daily life.

Change, Lange argues, came from two sources. First, there was a growing official interest in the racial hygiene of the lower orders of white society. State officials drew both on British expertise in the management of the poor to reconstruct the Johannesburg municipality after the Anglo-Boer war (pp. 48-64), and on Social Darwinist ideas of class, degeneration, and miscegenation in designing social services and introducing urban planning, slum clearance and state employment schemes (pp. 59-67, 81-97, 102-110, 143-145, 157-159). The problem of racial order in the 1910s was “certainly about governability”, but it was, strikingly, “not so much of the Black ‘race’ as of the white”, and, particularly, the poor whites (pp. 5, 133-159), regarded with a mix of condescension, contempt, and fear. From the start, state reforms included a large dose of segregation, given a growth in Johannesburg’s African population from 59,605 in 1904 to 101,971 in 1911 (p.83). Their scope was, however, initially tempered by the power of the mining houses and a respect for market forces unusual in a settler colony. After the unification of South Africa in 1910, such laissez-faire was replaced by systematic social engineering and an early welfare system, emphasizing relief works and industrial education (pp. 153-157).

The second pressure for change was the dramatic rise of the white working-class movement after 1907. This was expressed in the victories of the Labour Party, which won control of the Transvaal provincial government in 1914, and of the Johannesburg municipality in 1915 and 1919, where it promoted social reform (pp. 47, 80-81, 91, 140). It was also shown in the militant, but sectional, trade unionism that shook the country in 1907, 1913, and 1914, and most dramatically, in 1922, where over 200 deaths purchased a mixed set of reforms in labour and industrial policy (pp. 80, 88-89, 139-140). The “white labourism” that dominated this movement – a mixture of class struggle and racism – coincided in some respects with official segregation, but added a sharp dash of radical opposition to the state and big business.

Overall, Lange’s work is an evocative and important contribution to our understanding of South African labour and social history. The experience of the white working class shown here is difficult to reconcile, for instance, with Frantz Fanon’s assertion in *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonialism was neatly split between native and settler, “into compartments, a motionless, Manichaean world”, where race alone was the determinant of power, consciousness, and struggle. And yet there is no doubt that race played an absolutely central role in the South African working-class formation, a role that is not always effectively explained by Lange.

One of Lange’s key arguments is that ethnic differences amongst white workers have been exaggerated: citing a significant rate of intermarriage between immigrant English and local Afrikaner, and a “comparatively large” and unexpected Afrikaner adherence to the Anglican Church, she concludes that “national distinctions” were “superseded by the common experience” of widespread poverty, job insecurity, fear of replacement by Africans, and an unsympathetic state (pp. 9-26, 30-32, 111-126, 167-169). What is not very clearly explained is why this “withering” of “ethnic solidarity” (p. 31) was not coupled to a “withering” of racial solidarities in the slums of Johannesburg, where whites lived alongside Africans, Asians, and coloureds. Official

obsessions with “miscegenation” aside, such racial integration was, as the rise of white labourism indicates, rare and unpopular.

While the “ideological construction of the poor white problem” is extensively discussed, the potency, and shifting meanings, of the notion of “poor white” itself, and the manner in which the term acquired ethnic connotations, is not. Lange suggests, as noted, that ethnic divisions within the white working class were relatively unimportant and often permeable, and she also provides data that indicates the traditional view of poor whites as newly urbanized and unskilled Afrikaners is problematic: for example, the low-wage and marginal occupations traditionally regarded as poor Afrikaner preserves, such as cab drivers, labourers, and railway workers, were dominated by the English between 1890 and 1906 (p. 19). While a case can be made that there is need to re-examine the composition of the poor whites with a fresh eye, Lange consistently falls back into traditional references to the “ethnic character” of the lower strata, the “unskilled workers, largely of Afrikaner descent” (pp. 66, 72, note 86, p. 66, 157).

Lange does make some passing to the emerging, problematic, literature on “whiteness”- a literature that does, at least, provide at least a potential route into issues of racialization – but this is not really integrated into the study. This is a pity, because her painstaking research provides an immanent critique of that form of “whiteness” studies associated with writers such as David Roediger and the self-described “new abolitionist”, Noel Ignatiev. Both writers tend to collapse white identity into “white privilege,” reducing the former to a vehicle for the latter. Further, they typically characterize the former in the narrowest manner – as an arbitrarily demarcated, rather flat, and quintessentially modern social category – while failing to provide any rigorous and consistent definition of the latter.

Lange’s data suggests, however, that in South Africa, white identity was pervasive even in the absence of evident “white privilege”, as the situation of the poor whites indicates, and that white identity existed outside of capitalist relations, for the Afrikaner hinterland was quasi-feudal at most. Furthermore, the boundaries of “whiteness” were far from fluid, given a general and unquestioned acceptance of Afrikaners as white, despite pervasive Imperial hostility (cf. pp. 26–30, 102–103) and given that the “whiteness” of the poor whites was never in question. If the couplets of white identity/white privilege and white identity/modernity can break in this manner, questions must be raised about the “new abolitionist” project, and about its understanding of race, and it is perhaps here that Lange’s findings are most useful.

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