

REVIEW ARTICLE: AFRICAN MINE LABOUR IN SOUTHERN RHODESIA

DAVID ROSENBERG⁺

C. Van Onselen, Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia 1900-1933, London, Pluto Press, 1976, p. 322.

The development of an African working class has received some attention from historians and anthropologists.¹ However, Van Onselen's study of African mine labour in Southern Rhodesia is of exceptional importance in that it relates the economic history of the gold mining industry that sustained this central African colony in its early days to the making of the African working class in Southern Rhodesia. This is not an attempt to reconstruct history from below in the manner of traditional labour history, and its central theme is of the development of working class consciousness among miners. Van Onselen takes E.P. Thompson's position in analysing class consciousness as a social relationship as his starting point.² This is an advance on the 'common-sense' anthropology that merely states, 'the African newly arrived from his rural home to work in a mine is first of all a miner and possibly resembles miners everywhere',³ as well as a similar 'common-sense' sociology of miners.⁴ English miners are located in English social democracy with its political parties and trade unions in a way which the copper miners of Zambia and the gold miners of South Africa and Rhodesia cannot even comprehend.

The geological realities and the specific economic circumstances of gold mining in Rhodesia imposed of logic and dynamic far removed from those of the Witwatersrand. Rhodesia, unlike the Rand, did not have a more or less continuous gold reef which meant that the industry could not profit from the economies of scale that were possible on the Witwatersrand

⁺Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, University of Nairobi.

or benefit from the centralization that existed in Johannesburg. The output from a large Rhodesian mine was only about one tenth that of an average Witwatersrand mine. The Rand mines also had a longer working life, larger profits and greater capital resources. Within the Southern African regional economic system, the South African mines could afford to make more sizeable investments which meant a higher salary and wage structure forcing the Rhodesian mines to compete for its black and white labour supplies. It also meant that the Rhodesian mines could not compete with the standards of food, accommodation, hospitalisation and compensation which the Rand mines offered their employees. Unlike the Rand mines the Rhodesian Mines could never afford to employ large numbers of skilled white miners - it was the intense exploitation of cheap African labour throughout the history of the industry that contributed to its profitability. Van Onselen argues that after 1903, big capital, largely South African, moved in and created a semi-monopoly whereby the major contribution to the total annual production only were derived from between nine to fifteen large mines and the rest of the output came from over three hundred producers of greatly varying sizes. Whereas the years between 1899 and 1903 had seen a marked rise in the real wages of African miners, the years after 1903 are remarkable for the reductions witnessed in black miners' wages. On this reduction was built the long-term survival of the industry, its expansion and development and this enabled the industry to yield gold worth £89 millions between 1900 and 1933.⁵

The rise of South African investments in the Rhodesian mines need an analysis of mining capital in South Africa which Van Onselen does not give. Legassick has argued that the development of gold mining in the Transvaal greatly accelerated the predominance of imperial capital over local capital. For technical reasons gold mining required inputs of capital on a scale inaccessible to the local bourgeoisie. This capital became available in Britain because of the urgent needs of the international economy for gold currency. It was instrumental in the creation of a highly centralized structure of control in gold mining whose ownership was largely in the hands of nouveau riche South Africans or immigrants. Between 1887 and 1913 some £125 million invested in gold mining alone was from Britain and Europe; and in the latter years less than 15 per cent of shares were held in

South Africa.⁶ After 1918 the rate of new foreign capital inflow slackened in mining and leading mining houses looked for new investment fields outside South Africa. Mining in South Africa came increasingly under the control of the local bourgeoisie and by the 1930s the local share ownership had increased from 15 per cent to 40 per cent. From the 1920s the Anglo-American corporation of Oppenheimer invested in mining outside South Africa - notably on the Zambian copperbelt and in Rhodesia to a lesser extent and interlocked with British and American capital in Africa. It is a major weakness in Van Onselen's text that the capitalization process in what he calls the regional economic system is not adequately dealt with. While South African capital in Rhodesia apart from mining between 1918-1939 was still comparatively small, its expansion after 1945 had political and economic significance.⁷

Though African wages presented the most important target for the mine owners in their attempts to minimize costs, the savings effected through wage reductions alone were not sufficient in themselves to ensure adequate profits. Within the mining industry it was appreciated, Van Onselen argues, that the need to reduce costs had to proceed beyond direct expenditure on African labour to embrace indirect expenditure. This meant curtailing expenditure on food, accommodation, hospitals and compensation for injury. Cost minimization was, in short, not only to reflect itself in the compounds, but to govern the living conditions of black miners. Until 1930, 3000 miners had lost their lives in accidents and over 27,000 miners had lost their lives due to occupational diseases. This did not prevent an important mining official from claiming that current wages paid in Rhodesia in 1900, with food and medical care provided, compared favourably with European standards. Rhodesia mines, faced with competition from mines in the Transvaal which could give higher cash wages and relatively more attractive labour conditions, turned to a number of mechanisms in retaining the services of workers who were constantly tempted to move south. The role of the colonial state was to supply the mining industry with a supply of cheap coerced labour. In some districts, the peasants were simply rounded up and then handed over to the mines. Those peasants who refused to go were in some cases whipped by the native commissioner or in others had their grain stores burnt down

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(p. 105). The colonial state superimposed a tax system on the peasants to force them to earn cash at the largest labour market close by - the Rhodesian mines. This device was used even more extensively in the interests of settler capital in Kenya, and was a favourite weapon of the colonial states in Africa.⁸ In colonial societies in which the metropolitan state, dominating the colonial state, favoured peasant production of cash crops over estate production by settler capital, the drive to create a proletariat out of the peasantry was far less intense. In these societies, the colonial state reproduced the peasantry as a numerically dominant class. Thus, after the Maji Maji wars in colonial Tanganyika, the Germans moved to support peasant production over settler capital and a similar process occurred in French West Africa.⁹

No central African peasant would voluntarily seek out conditions of employment where he was to be paid the lowest wages, obligated by the longest contracts and sent to the mines with the worst health and labour management records in Southern Africa. To avoid this however, a peasant had to walk the hundreds of miles to the labour markets, have the necessary cash with which to provide himself with food and clothing for the journey. The normal vicissitudes, well described by Van Onselen, in agricultural cycles, sheer distance from the labour markets and the new taxes all made in-roads into the bargaining power of the 'independent' work-seeker.

Nyasaland, Rhodesia and South Africa were directly linked in a chain of economic competition for cheap African labour within the regional economic system. The southernmost centres, where capitalism was most developed, each in turn fed off the less developed northern periphery for part of its labour supplies. The flow of immigrant voluntary labour from Nyasaland should be seen against a background of local demands for the proletarianization of the African peasantry to meet the requirements of a growing capitalism. The mines in Rhodesia succeeded to the extent that they moved from a position of acute 'labour' shortage in 1900, to a position in 1933 where a contented industry could report that, 'on the whole native labour is cheap, plentiful and satisfactory, and causes very little trouble' (p. 127). An interesting contrast is the copperbelt mines in Northern Rhodesia. Here the colonial state committed itself even more firmly to a migrant labour system. As Berger remarks, the colonial state 'deliberately

encouraged it, expanded it through the pressures of taxation and rejected the opportunity to foster a settled African labour force'.¹⁰ The colonial state attempted to slow down the process of the proletarianization of these migrant workers and they were not opposed in this policy by either the mining companies or the European miners.¹¹

The labour-coercive system of the Rhodesian mines was also organized to keep reluctant workers on the mines in a period when declining wages were normal. Furthermore, mine management were faced by the problem of large numbers of unskilled peasants who were to be controlled and disciplined to meet the needs of a modern industry with limited European manpower. The mine owners and the colonial state looked to South Africa and imported the compound system as the solution - much of the daily routine in the compounds, described in great detail by Van Onselen, revolved round the need to force unmotivated or resistant black miners to work. Brutal physical assaults by supervisors, fines, jails, whipping constituted the most favoured form of discipline by management in these compounds. Murders while common were not favoured by the more liberal and rational of the mine management as dead labour was unproductive.

In an attempt to stimulate productivity amongst workers who received little financial inducements, overseers employers exploited the socio-economic differences within the black labour force. Underground work gangs were selected along ethnic lines and did much to inhibit the development of working class unity amongst the compound inhabitants. When Fanon argues that 'colonialism does not simply state the existence of tribes; it also reinforces and separates them',¹² he is looking at one side of the coin. In Epstein's study of the development of working class consciousness among copperbelt miners, it was found that despite all the efforts of management and the colonial state to tribalize the copperbelt miners, mining capital itself produced among the miners the unifying class consciousness which was politically destructive of the conscious policy of tribalization.¹³ The struggle to create a working class organization in the conflict with mining capital on the copper belt was the grave-digger of tribalization in the era of the colonial state. In the period of the post-colonial state in Zambia, the local ruling class now attempts to fragment the mineworkers by articulating a position that they are a 'labour aristoc-

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racy' who are exploiting the peasants. A widely respected English industrial sociologist gave this myth theoretical support for the attacks on the mine workers in the post-independence period.¹⁴

The isolation of the mining compounds helped both managements and the colonial state to regulate the flow of political ideas amongst the mine workers. All in-coming letters to miners were funnelled through the compound manager's office and it facilitated a close watch to be kept on 'troublemakers' who may have been responsive to the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (IUC) and other 'native' organizations. The managements went further and made great use of compound spies who were able to detect and infiltrate meetings held on mine premises - little wonder then that trade unionists and nationalists of a later era found great difficulty in organizing on mine premises.

All dominant ideologies under capitalism tend to mystify the underlying class structure. If an ideology has a strong component of racial supremacy, class relationships are marked or articulated through trade categories. In the theoretical base of African sociology, the method of the researcher often merely reflects this ideological level.¹⁵ Much of the work of African anthropology on migrant labour reflected an ideological tendency to see migrant labour as merely reflecting the strength of 'tribal traditions' which pull the migrant peasant worker back from the 'foreign and corrosive urban areas'. Colonial administrators and liberal anthropologists could both subscribe to this myth,¹⁶ although the relationship of anthropologists to colonial capitalism was never a simple one as can be seen from the work carried out by anthropologists on the copper belt mines.¹⁷

The strength of the dominant ideology among Rhodesian gold miners was unevenly internalized and this is inadequately conceptualized in Van Onselen's text. Empirical accounts of petty accumulation, religious practices, prostitution, violence etc., are given as the response of the mine workers to their class situation and also a description of the failure of African unions to organize the potential mass base. The context of working class resistance to mining capital's organized and successful attack on the real earnings of African miners is not correctly examined. Contradictions inside working class consciousness were partly produced by the attraction of an earlier 'golden part' of relatively high wages and the fragmentation caused

by the drive towards petty accumulation among significant numbers of miners. Numerous strike actions by mine workers are documented by Van Onselen who argues that 'considering the power which they challenged and the control to which they were subject, the mine workers showed an impressive degree of articulate, literate and organized resistance to the alliance of the employers and the state' (p. 227).

Van Onselen considers however that it was the unarticulated, unorganized protest and resistance which the employers and the state found most difficult to detect or suppress (p. 227). In Rhodesia, unlike South Africa, the colonial state was never powerful enough to suppress large scale movement of migrant workers moving south to find higher wages and better working conditions. In an earlier paper, Van Onselen gave the example of a conscious regional boycott of the Bonsor mine and the large-scale desertions among the workers, both foreign and Rhodesian, on account of its exceptionally high death rate. This, incidently while badly under-capitalized and with a low profitability, contributed to its demise.¹⁸ The structure of desertion represented a systematic and conscious attempt to sell labour at the highest price as Van Onselen convincingly argues in his text.

The contention, however, that crime in the compounds was another form of class resistance as the volume of crime was aimed specifically at mine managements is more dubious. Van Onselen admits that much of the crime was aimed at African miners themselves. The large amount of stealing from the mines by individual workers was merely the result of the lack of collective power and control by the miners in class terms and reflects the weakness of working class consciousness and organization rather than the opposite - a romanticization of crime as expressing working class consciousness ignores this facet.¹⁹ The conceptualization of resistance ignores the ideological hegemony over the miners which colonial capitalism establishes. Crime, avoiding work, etc., strengthened the 'paternalistic' stereotypes of the miners as 'dangerous children' who have to be firmly controlled in their own interests.²⁰ Van Onselen's concentration on establishing a working class consciousness ignores the ideological boundaries in which it operated and therefore is unable to explain the fragmentation and different traditions among the miners.

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The complexity of analysing the culture of the miners can be seen in Van Onselen's statement that 'dancing too could play its part as a means of social control. It provided cheap, harmless entertainment for workers, who might otherwise find their relaxation in drinking with adverse consequences for productivity. Dancing also had the effect of diverting the workers' minds from more serious issues of exploitation. Finally, such dancing was largely ethnically based, it had the effect of reinforcing division amongst the workers along tribal lines', (p. 189). A different interpretation of dancing among copperbelt miners is given by Clyde Mitchell.²¹ The Kalela dance illustrates some consequences of uneven proletarianization. It is performed by different teams each of which comes from a particular tribe. Each team mocks the other team in the audience. It taunts and derides them mercilessly, imparting to them the basest obscenity, unpleasantness and perverse sexuality. Superficially each team exalts its own tribe's virtues at the expense of the others. Surprisingly, the members of the lampooned tribe laugh as loudly as the others at their symbolic degradation. Mitchell was struck by the fact that dancers named their hierarchy of officials after the hierarchy of British military or civil dignitaries. Moreover, the dancers do not wear tribal dress but rather choose neat European clothing and maintain their smartness and neatness throughout the dance. Since dancers are unskilled and semi-skilled labourers, this is a real sacrifice. Mitchell concludes that the Kalela dance symbolizes the miners dissatisfaction with their class position. There is yet another side of class consciousness in the Kalela dance. Imagine a miner attired in European dress obscenely posturing and gesturing to an audience of his own people, and all the while addressed and referred to by the symbols of British administrative and military authority. Such dancing obviously does not portray respect or awe for these symbols of colonial rule. The white man's burden has been reduced to the gyrations of an African miner. Van Onselen's functionalist interpretation that stressed dancing's safety value function, that is, as a release of the compound repressions and as a relatively straightforward expression of inter tribal rivalry is too simplistic.

Any study of the development of working class consciousness in Africa must also attempt to analyse the growth of structural limitations to migrant workers or 'stable' workers acquiring enough capital through their wages to

establish themselves in the formation of an African petit bourgeoisie of traders, middle peasants, shopkeepers, etc. The specific development of colonial capitalism and the potential social mobility of a section of the labour force and its impact on the development of working class consciousness is not analysed at any level by Van Onselen. Yet in the past, sections of this African petit bourgeoisie have partially been drawn from certain strata inside a migrant or semi-migrant working class and the complexity of class relationships here has never been adequately studied. The question that can be posed is whether even those workers who most strongly resisted the drive of mining capital dream about transforming themselves into shopkeepers, petty traders, etc. At what period of the history of the mining working class did they internalize their destinies as members of an increasingly stable working class with little hope of social mobility? Van Onselen informs us in the text that many of the early trade union leaders who attempted to unionize the mines were engaged in keeping shops, trade or selling beer, etc. Did the latent class antagonism between these categories only become articulated in the later period of colonial capitalism or can this be seen as part of the reason for the failure of unionization? Was the very weakness of this proto-petit-bourgeoisie the factor which allowed it to supply leadership to the new union? These are questions Van Onselen does not pose by his emphasis on the fact of resistance, in itself an ideological mode of explanation.²²

The fragmentation of the African miners by Van Onselen is perceived through the analysis of the compound as a total institution of a certain type rather than through the possibility of an analysis which locates the early articulation of a weak petit bourgeoisie with colonial capitalism and the subordination of an even weaker African working class to both.

This era of colonial history in Rhodesia has been insufficiently analysed. Neither theoretical concepts nor empirical history has done more than state the problem. Phimister in his analysis of peasant production argues that, the development of the mining industry created a growth in the demand for food which allowed the expansion of an African rural petit bourgeoisie between 1890 and 1914. As a colonial capitalism develops a capitalist agriculture, Phimister argues, it threatens the very class which was allowed to expand in this period.²³ Bundy has argued a similar hypothesis in the impact of the South African mining industry on the development

of a South African black rural petit bourgeoisie.²⁴ This is also central to Arrighi's analysis of the proletarianization of the African peasantry in Southern Rhodesia, but Arrighi ignores the rise and fall of this class in his statement that by 1930, the 'African middle and rural petty bourgeoisie were numerically and economically insignificant'.²⁵ He states without any qualification that African wage workers and petty bourgeoisie were merely 'appendages of the peasantry rather than independent classes' for this period of history. This, in Arrighi, is determined by his conception of the agrarian question, which in Rhodesia has its own specificity as neither the Prussian road nor the American road to capitalist agriculture, which Lenin saw as the two main historical paths, were inserted into its political economy even though by 1920, the European agrarian bourgeoisie consolidated their hold on the best land and controlled the agricultural loan bank of the colonial state.

The development of a white working class in this period is absent with particular consequences for Van Onselen's text. Yet the conflict between the white working class and the bourgeoisie was particularly strong before 1933 in Southern Rhodesia. In that year, an inter-class alliance resulted in a Reform Party government which lasted until 1962.

The first years of European settlement was a period in which both the European rural and urban petit bourgeoisie and European workers challenged the political and economic policies of the British South African Company. This European populism allowed the class contradictions inside the colonial state to be expressed.²⁶ The colonial state which expressed a particular class balance both internally to Southern Rhodesia and externally to the world economy, is not analysed other than in its straightforward consistent support for mining capital.²⁷ Also the European workers repeatedly came into conflict with European capital in this period. Thus the railway industry, which employed the largest group of white workers provided a natural vanguard for the white working class, as thirty years later it was to do for the black working class. In 1919, the Rhodesian Mine and General Workers' Union organized a strike and the railwaymen blocked Wankie coal. In 1920, a second rail strike secured an eight-hour day and improved wages for European workers. The counter-offensive of European capital

against the European workers was successful. By playing off the Amalgamated Engineering Union, a craft union, against the industrial unions, mainly the Rhodesia Railway Workers' Union and the Rhodesian Mine and General Workers' Union, all the unions of the European workers had been effectively broken or weakened by 1923. In this context of white working class defeat, the alliance which subordinated it to the national rural bourgeoisie and the national petit bourgeoisie was forged.

Van Onselen's text is a direct challenge to the accepted orthodox 'marxist' analysis of Southern Rhodesia which argues that, 'wage workers still belonged to the peasantry and their location as migrant workers blocked them from developing class consciousness and class solidarity. While Van Onselen's text has major weaknesses and a simplistic evaluation of the complexity of class consciousness, it does move away from the preoccupation with the study of the internal dominant class power bloc. His text attempts unsuccessfully to rescue the historicity of the African working class from its assimilation into the ranks of the 'people' in the work of popularist and nationalist scholarship of the liberal school and all its variants. However, while this text is an advance on the attempt to construct history from below, the traditional labour history is not a marxist history for the term ought to imply the strict application of an elaborate theoretical mode of analysis to the most complex of all scientific subject-matter. Even in a prescientific state, historical research is by no means inevitably condemned to mere sterile empiricism; but it is necessary to add that the programme of a fully scientific history remains not merely to be realized, but even to be drafted. Until then, the capitalist mode of production and its colonial articulation while having a universalized history, will still capture research at the level of 'appearances' alone.

Thus in Van Onselen's text, a collapse of a concrete analysis of the colonial state, the level of the development of the productive forces, the superimposition of the capitalist mode of production on pre-capitalist modes of production and the historical development of classes takes place, though empirical references to these theoretical problems are frequently presented.

The text, the product of great productivity of labour and scholarship, should still capture the interests of those engaged in the study of the Rhodesian and African working class. Unfortunately the price alone does not permit African workers to purchase it as Pluto Press has no intention of bringing out a cheap paperback edition.

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- 1 T. Ranger, The Peoples Voice in Southern Rhodesia, 1898-1930, Manchester University Press, 1958; A. Epstein, Politics in an Urban African Community, London, Heinemann, 1970. J. Mckenzie, "African Labour in South Central Africa", Ph.D. Thesis, University of Columbia, 1969. G. Arrighi, "Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective", Journal of Development Studies, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1970.
- 2 E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1970, Preface.
- 3 M. Gluckman, "Anthropological Problems Arising from the African Industrial Revolution" in A. Southall (ed.), Social Change in Modern Africa, Oxford University Press, 1961.
- 4 See M.I. Bulmer, "Sociological Models of the Mining Community" in The Sociological Review, Vol. 23, No. 1, February 1975.
- 5 See a comparison for South Africa in F. Wilson, Labour in the South African Gold Mines, Cambridge University Press, 1969; and F. Johnstone, Class and Race Relations in South Africa Gold Mining Industry, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976.
- 6 M. Legassick, "Capital Accumulation and Violence in South Africa" in Economy and Society, Vol. 3, No. 3, August 1974.
- 7 See G. Arrighi, The Political Economy of Rhodesia, The Hague, Mouton, 1970.
- 8 See R. Van Zwannenberg, Colonial Capitalism and Labour in Kenya 1919-1939, Nairobi, East African Literature Bureau, 1975 and P. Gutkind, The African Proletariat, McGill University Press, 1975.
- 9 See J. Iliffe, Tanganyika Under German Rule 1905-1912, Cambridge University Press, 1969, and J. Suret-Canale, French Colonialism in Tropical Africa 1900-1945, C. Hurst and Co., 1964.
- 10 See E. Berger, Labour, Race and Colonial Rule, London, Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 40 and M. Buroway, "The Functions and Reproduction of Migrant Labour" in The American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 81, No. 5, March 1976.
- 11 Berger, *ibid.*, pp. 68-77.
- 12 F. Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, New York, Grove Press, 1965, p. 73.
- 13 A. Epstein, Politics in an Urban African Community, Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1958.

- 14 See R. Bates, Unions, Parties and Political Development, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1971 and H. Turner, Wage Trends, Wage Policies and Collective Bargaining, Cambridge University Press, 1965. In England Turner had defended the working class against state legislation but in Zambia he supports the state against the mine workers.
- 15 See B. Kapferer, Strategy and Transaction in an African Factory - African Workers and Indian Management in a Zambian Town, Manchester University Press, 1972 and M. Buroway, The Colour of Class on the Coppermines, Zambian Papers No. 7, Manchester University Press, 1972. Buroway's latest papers on South Africa are conceptually very different, however. See also M. Legassick, "The Analysis of Racism in South Africa", unpublished paper, 1975.
- 16 J. Lee, Colonial Development and Good Government, London, Oxford University Press, 1967.
- 17 See R. Brown's article on the "Rhodes-Livingstone Institute" in T. Asad (ed.), Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter, Ithaca, Ithaca Press, 1973.
- 18 C. Van Onselen, "Worker Consciousness in Black Miners in Southern Rhodesia 1900-1970", Journal of African History, XIV, 2 1973.
- 19 See J. Young, "Working Class Criminology", (unpublished, 1973) for a fuller argument on this. See also S. Trapido "African Social Control in South Africa", (unpublished paper, 1971) for police use of criminals against workers.
- 20 See E. Genovese, The Political Economy of Slavery, New York, Random House, 1968 and E. Genovese Roll, Jordon Roll, New York, Pantheon, 1975 for parallel system on the plantation economy in the U.S.A.
- 21 See C. Mitchell, The Kalela Dance, Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1956.
- 22 See D. Dencon and A. Kuper, "Nationalist Historians in Search of a Nation" in African Affairs, Vol. 69, No. 27, October 1970, for an understanding of this ideological function among historians.
- 23 I.R. Phimister, "Peasant Production and Underdevelopment in Southern Rhodesia", African Affairs, Vol. 75, April 1974.
- 24 C. Bundy, "Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry", African Affairs, Vol. 71, October 1972.
- 25 G. Arrighi, The Political Economy of Rhodesia, The Hague, Mouton, 1970, p. 30.
- 26 I. Henderson, "White Populism in Southern Rhodesia" in Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. 14, No. 4, September 1972.
- 27 See A. Emmanuel, "White Settler Colonialism and the Myth of Investment Imperialism", in New Left Review No. 73, May-June 1972 and H. Alavi "The State in Post-Colonial Societies" in New Left Review, No. 74, June-August 1972, for statements on this theoretical problem.

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