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Review Article

The Imperialising of Zimbabwe

A Review of

An Economic and Social History of Zimbabwe, 1890-1948: Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle, by Ian Phimister (London: Longman, 1988; pp xii+336, Hardback); and

Zimbabwe's Prospects: Issues of Race, Class, State and Capital in Southern Africa. Edited by Colin Stoneman (London: Macmillan, 1988; pp xii+377, Paperback)

Julian Cobbing

The neo-colony of Zimbabwe is, in company with the forty or so sister units of 'sub-Saharan Africa' (a term with an increasingly racist innuendo) in the grip of a crisis of grave proportions. The outlook for over ninety percent of Zimbabwe's people is what the World Bank would call worrisome.

Historically Zimbabwe is an appendage of South Africa's colonialism, and the destinies of the two territories will continue to be intertwined. Events and solutions in Zimbabwe will be influenced, if not determined by what happens in the south. In the meantime the facts of the situation in Zimbabwe are of compelling interest for those who will create that South African future.

Phimister's excellent book reveals how the lives of the peoples of this arbitrarily-shaped (a mouse's head? a teapot?) colony were turned upside-down after Rhodes' lunge for the north in 1888-90, how they were forced to work harder, and how the products of their labour completely useless to the blacks (gold, chrome, tobacco, coffee) were sucked out for the further energization of the peoples of Europe and North America. Complex processes of class formation and intra-capitalist competitions for the lion's share of the profits were started. During the formal colonial era, a local, white settler capital, itself split into competing sectors, fought out a losing battle with 'international capital'. Conversely, whilst the great majority of blacks had by the 1940s been impoverished and semi-proletarianized, a petit bourgeois class of more successful peasant farmers, traders, teachers and so on emerged. Although Phimister

stops in about 1950, it was during the next two decades that central imperialism found it more efficient to work through the black comprador petit bourgeoisie than through the 'difficult' white settlers. Phimister's chapter in the Stoneman book notes the continuation of the black bourgeoisie's tactical alliance (the two-stage revolution, the multi-class alliance) with the workers and peasants. Once in the driving seat, they sold out their allies at the Lancaster House conferences in 1979-80. Since then, a full-blooded capitalist programme has been pursued by Mugabe's ZANU, who nevertheless make the extraordinary claim of being Marxist-Leninists.

The short-term outcome of this 'National Democratic Revolution' is described in *Zimbabwe's Prospects*, edited by Colin Stoneman. Not all of the over twenty contributors grasp the irrevocability of the deception, but they concur on the following points. There has been no significant land distribution, nor will there be. Zimbabwe's industry is at once overwhelmingly owned by transnational and/or South African corporations and strangled for want of foreign exchange. Profits haemorrhage out of the country and new investment is sparse. A bourgeoisie (now multi-racial) form only five percent of the population but enjoy over fifty percent of income, as in colonial times. Population is expanding, at about three percent p.a., significantly faster than GNP at around one percent, with the result that as elsewhere in Africa the people become poorer every year. And this from a desperately low base. The most painful fact of all is that only about ten percent of the over 100 000 annual school-leavers (many with 'O' levels) will find a job. The prospects for the 1990s are even bleaker, not least for the children whose photograph appears on the front cover of the book. The Zimbabwe state's function is likely to become increasingly one of coercion and policing.

Phimister has analysed for us the prelude to this nightmare. Even as the black peoples of the area were being machine-gunned into submission, surplus capital began to pour in from Europe and South Africa. In two brilliant chapters Phimister dissects the 'episodic looting' of the 1890s, and the basic erection of the colonial state after 1903. The three main tasks of the early colonials were to procure labour for the mines ('driving to profitability along a road littered with the broken and diseased bodies of black workers'), to seize the best land and to evict blacks from off it, and to wreck the emergent black rural bourgeoisie who attempted to exploit the opportunities of the market. Through the economic vicissitudes of the two world wars and the great depression (chapters 3 to 5) they pursued these aims ruthlessly. The Land Apportionment Act of 1931 solidified the sequestration of the bulk of the population into Reserves comprising under thirty percent of the land area, and that mostly low-lying, hot, unhealthy, infertile, and removed from the arteries of transport. An Industrial Conciliation Act in 1934 rigorously controlled labour relations. Maize Control and Cattle Levy Acts discriminated against black maize and beef. The blacks took the shock of the depression by

being made to work harder for lower wages, and of the second world war by having their wages eroded by inflation and by ever-increasing government controls. These extended into every detail of agriculture in the Reserves, especially after these threatened to become terminally eroded and overgrazed as more blacks were squeezed in during the 'second colonial occupation' in the years after 1945. So was born the dichotomy between the impoverished and over-organized Communal Areas (as the Reserves were renamed in 1980), and the molly-coddled Large-Scale Commercial Farms (still today owned by whites).

'Local' Rhodesian capital nonetheless faced a sea of problems, most of which continue to plague Zimbabwe. The colony was landlocked, far from markets, and overly dependent on South African ports. Argentinian beef, for instance, was better and cheaper than Rhodesian beef. Tobacco prices tended to collapse suddenly as in 1912 and 1928. And it was only the fortuitous British dollar shortage after 1945 which enabled tobacco briefly to boom. Gold was, and is, heavily dependent on pricing and currency fluctuation of central imperialism. Whenever the settlers succeeded in getting something off the ground, 'big', that is monopoly, capital moved in and took it over, if it had not, as in the case of chrome and coal, controlled it from the start. The growth of secondary industry after the 1930s (chapter 5) was continuously buffeted by South African competition, take-over, and customs policies. In pursuit of elusive riches, the often under-capitalized farmers 'successively hurled themselves over the "cliffs" of cattle, cotton, tobacco and maize' like the Gadarene swine. Even with maize, profitability was difficult to secure, and this with the cheapest labour in the world. The auguries were not good. The near Californian living conditions of some of the settlers did not reflect any inherent strength of the colonial economy.

Phimister ends by highlighting two contradictions. It was to be the emergent black petite bourgeoisie — bus-owners, traders, band-leaders, teachers, etc — who spear-headed political protest in the 1920s and 1930s, and rather equivocally 'unleashed' the trade union movement in the 1940s. To the amusement of the CID attendant at the meetings, the leaders spent much time explaining to their membership — the actual railway, hotel and industrial workers — why it was not permitted to strike. Secondly, the white settlers' racism turned them, as in Kenya, against the emerging 'progressive' black farmers and entrepreneurs, whose advancement was in the interests of central capitalism. It is not, indeed, fully clear why this conflict did not end in another Mau Mau by 1950.

At this fairly critical point Phimister stops, inducing a sense of loss that he is not to escort us through the era of attempted decolonisation and the bankrupt dénouement of UDI. It is to be hoped he will soon provide us with the full, overview text covering the period, 1890-1980. Despite the truncation, however, he has given us the fullest and best depiction of the Southern

Rhodesian (or colonial Zimbabwean) settler state in its grotesqueness and complexity. The coverage and summarisation of a huge existing literature are formidable. He is thoroughly justified in focussing on capital accumulation and class struggle, intrinsically difficult themes to handle successfully, which the reactionary older texts of Gann and Blake avoided. Phimister is particularly strong on the black rural areas and class differentiation in that context. There are excellent cameo descriptions of the 'faction fighting' in the Bulawayo townships during Christmas 1929 and of the worsening conditions for workers which led to the railway workers' strike of 1945 and the more general strike of 1948. Both in the black rural and urban areas there emerged groups of wealthier men, for example 'one Nzula who startled Bulawayo's white community by arriving "in his own fine new motor car" for Jameson's burial in the Matopos in 1920'. There were also such as the Chadavaenzi brothers 'whose hugely successful transport company serviced the province of Mashonaland North'. Even within the 'teeming locations... the unity of the ghetto was always more apparent than real'. Already by the 1950s an affluent black middle class was growing whose diet, acquisitiveness, and taking of holidays marked them very much off from 'casual labourers earnings £1 per month'. Whilst the unity of 'exploited blacks' was illusory, 'capital's internal differences were marginal, if not irrelevant. It was brutally clear that the real struggle was between capital and labour'.

Under Smith 'local settler' capital made its last stand against an increasingly transnational capital, now in alliance with the black bourgeoisie, and again lost. On the other hand, the exigencies of political crisis and then war in the 1960s and 1970s gave a superficial credibility to a 'class alliance' of the black peoples of Zimbabwe. Despite the 30 000 dead in the fighting, a triumphalist miasma lasted until about 1982-83. It then began to be noticed that with the unavoidable exceptions of health and education, none of the promises made by the leaders during the war were being kept. A once and for all economic expansion in 1980-82 was quickly throttled by the intrinsic primitiveness of the economy, the world recession, high interest rates and oil/petrol prices, weakening terms of trade, drought,² failure to stem the outflow of profits, the widening technological lead of central imperialism (just-in-time production, micro-technology), and the most culpable economic and budgetary mismanagement by the comrade leaders.

Zimbabwe's Prospects offers a chilling assessment of the situation as at 1986-87. The authors seem haunted by the elusiveness of solutions. The book is pervaded with a near paralysing 'realism', and intellectual pessimism that is a facet of the crisis itself. Only a few of the writers, for example Weiner, speak with any bluntness as to the situation. Several others nurture illusions, particularly as to the chances of a 'socialist' future (ie one providing a fair deal for the country's people) metamorphosing out of the capitalist 'first

stage'. The absence of an essay dealing with the political leadership hints ever so slightly at the fear of annoying people in high places.

At the symbolic centre is the land problem. Despite 'winning' the war the ZANU leadership accepted that there was to be no land expropriation. The crucial Lancaster House capitulation was that land should only change hands on a willing-seller, willing-buyer basis. By 1986 only about 35 000 families had been resettled, rather fewer than in the same period of Kenya's early 'independence'. The bulk of the best land, the euphemistically named Large-Scale Commercial Farms, remains both farmed by whites and under-(sometimes non)-utilized. By the mid-1980s, the black bourgeoisie were beginning to buy into the land themselves. ZANU also speaks of privatising land within the Communal Areas but, in the meantime, minutely regulates the CAs, as in colonial times. Despite many disadvantages some of the CA farmers succeeded in substantially increasing production of maize in the early 1980s. They have run up, however, against the problems of drought, land shortage, low prices, rising costs of inputs, and overpopulation. Accelerated class polarization has inevitably — given ZANU's policies — occurred. Large numbers of poor subsistence farmers find it more difficult every year to survive, particularly women-run households without additional cash from migrant labour. Weiner, one of the contributors not to mince words, notes: 'significant "Kenyanisation" of the land issue has already occurred'. Unlike in Kenya, though, the myth of the efficiency and indispensability of the white LSCFs continues to flourish.

The crystallisation out of a class of kulaks in the CAs, together with a rapidly increasing population, is leading to a stream of migrancy to the towns. Here there is a drastic and worsening housing shortage. The influx leads to burgeoning unemployment, and this further depresses urban wages. Women are especially vulnerable 'in a society governed by awesome individual responsibility for survival'.³ People lucky enough to have work are understandably most concerned not to lose it. There is a single 'corporate' (ie fascist) master trade union, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (cf the Central Organisation of Trade Unions in Kenya), and a Labour Relations Act 9 1985) which updates the old Industrial Conciliation Act. Only ministerially-approved strikes are legal. But as the minister jocularly remarked: 'All strikes since I took office have been illegal because I have not approved any strikes'. It is no surprise to learn that the ZCTU was attended at its birth by the USA's African-American Labour Centre. There is, now, a National Minimum Wage. But, as elsewhere in Africa, this is used to hold wages down rather than up. Since 1982 workers' real wages have declined in value by eighteen percent on average. Both per capita food production and real wages are back to the levels of the days of Ian Smith and Lardner Burke in the early 1970s, and still falling. In the rural areas low prices and other disincentives have led more and more peasants to revert to subsistence farming. In the factories what in the old

days the whites called 'loafing' has reappeared as workers go slow on the job. This reduces production and sabotages competitiveness. The position can only be turned about by the use of force, or by the appearance of better leadership. Neither are foreseeable in the near future.

Although the routine (indige-)nizing genuflections have been made, Zimbabwe's industry is still overwhelmingly foreign controlled. Profits (with some scant restrictions) flow out either directly, or, via taxation and debt-servicing, indirectly. By the mid-1980s Zimbabwe was sending more dollars out of the country than were coming in from all sources combined. Besides dollars spent on debt-servicing, industry is starved of foreign exchange because of inadequate export earnings and declining terms of trade. Devaluation of the Zimbabwean currency has made imports even more costly. Industry is as a result of these trends operating for the most part at only around one third capacity, and unemployment is soaring. Attempts to switch from the internal market to industrial exports have led to a further lowering of wages in order to increase competitiveness — and run into protectionism, particularly in European and Asian markets. There are intrinsic difficulties in competing with the technologically more advanced and better managed economies. And the technological gaps are widening almost exponentially. Most of Zimbabwe's key exports, such as radios, go in any case to the Republic of South Africa, which is not good news. A chapter by Fransman on what Zimbabwe has to learn from the Asian NICs suggests that Zimbabwe is unlikely to be able to emulate the Koreans or Taiwan. But, apart from telling us it is not simply a matter of getting the price right, he does not tell us why.

If Zimbabwe's industry has not taken off, it is not from want of borrowing. Government debt by 1986 had reached \$US 2.4-billion. And this ate up in interest payments thirty percent of dollars earned from exports, mostly of primary raw materials and minerals. Thrown into the clutches of the World Bank/IMF, Zimbabwe was at once offered its personal Structural Adjustment Program. The essence of the 'bargain' was more loans in return for uninhibited capitalism, the free repatriation of profits, and the cossetting of the transnational corporations. ZANU's withdrawal from the agreement in 1984-85 merely exposed them to the blackmail of the international lenders. Moreover, as in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, the transnational corporations have cut back significantly in direct investment since the early 1980s. There is, they have for the moment concluded, only so much that can sufficiently profitably be sucked from an orange.

This multi-sectoral crisis is being played out on a strategic stage of immense vulnerability. To the south the hugely powerful South Africa acts as the United States' unruly regional watchdog, an unacknowledged but real part of the West's conditionality for Zimbabwe. Fresh and in practice from bludgeoning Angola and Mozambique, the Pretoria military hold a knife to Zimbabwe's throat. 'Friendly warning' acts of destabilization have included

an attempt to blow up the ZANU cabinet, the destruction at Gweru of much of Zimbabwe's airforce, the backing of "super-ZAPU" bandits in Matabeleland, and the turning of the so-called Mozambique Resistance Movement, which Pretoria controls, against Zimbabwe's eastern border. South Africa from time to time halts Zimbabwe's exports at Beitbridge (leading ZANU ministers to cull from their speeches references to international sanctions against the Republic), and more systematically, via the MNR, disrupts the export route out via Beira. In defence Mugabe has committed the Zimbabwe army into Mozambique. But the military costs of the operations roughly equal the saved trading profits. The sad reality is that at the moment nothing can stop South Africa cutting ninety percent of Zimbabwe's export-import trade whenever it wishes. In these circumstances Zimbabwe's present and future five-year plans can only be pretend five-year plans.

Stoneman's team, then, tell us what the problems are. It will be a useful book for students and intellectuals who will thank God they were not born black and poor in 1980s Zimbabwe. This is not the place to consider solutions, especially as the authors of *Zimbabwe's Prospects* offer none.

The last section of the book presents, instead, a grouping of catch-22s. Robinson advocates the surreptitious diversion of the fruits of the economy away from the 'priority growth of the middle classes' to 'the broad mass of the people'. But since the middle class has engineered that distribution and is happy with the way things are, no amount of surreptitiousness will be of use, particularly as one has to tiptoe the more silently in case Pretoria comes to hear. 'Democratic socialism in the region may not be easy to achieve', concludes Stoneman, 'it will assuredly be impossible in one small country'. Very true. Yet strangely not one contributor has thought how the political, resource and military critical mass of the unit could be made large enough. These sub-Saharan African 'countries' and their ruling elites have emerged historically in all their separate isolations precisely in order to thwart a wider unification and the inherently greater strength such a union would possess. This tessellation of boundaries was imperialism's greatest triumph in Africa. There is agreement among the authors, finally, that Zimbabwe's future is unplannable until after a successful resolution of the crisis in South Africa itself. In the meantime, nevertheless, they insist Zimbabwe ought not to lift a finger or take any risk to facilitate such an outcome — for example by giving significant help to the ANC — for fear of provoking counteraction from Pretoria. This, of course, is the single most important reason for the ease with which South Africa picks off its little neighbours one by one *and* simultaneously deals with its internal crisis. Zimbabwe will one day pay a heavy price for such pusillanimity, heavier by far than the price paid to date. Unless bolder strategies emerge, it is difficult not to agree with Evans: '...it is difficult to be optimistic'; '...the winds of the future seem cold indeed'.

Notes

1. André Astrow in *Zimbabwe. A Revolution that Lost Its Way?* stresses correctly that a *de facto* alliance continued between imperialism and the white settlers after 1965. But the best solution for Britain and the United States was what they achieved in 1980.
2. The awesome possibility that, as a result of global pollution and warming, drought will become more frequent is not discussed in *Stoneman*; the chapter on health fails to consider AIDS.
3. Page 169, chapter on Women in Independence, by Batezai, Mwalo and Truscott.

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