Review

William Beinart's *Twentieth Century South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1995.

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Perhaps as early as the Dobb-Sweezy debate, but certainly since the publication of *the Brenner Debate*, the problem of the rural roots of capitalist transformation in southern Africa has been begging for historical synthesis.[1] The last place one might expect to find an answer for the intricate relationship between rural household development, commodity production, trade, state infrastructure and the gold mining industry is in a textbook intended as an introduction to South African history for foreign undergraduates. But William Beinart presents just such an invaluable overview in his new book on the (very) long 20th century.

The early chapters of this book present very powerful syntheses of the regional patterns of late-19th and early-20th century agricultural change. The relationship between forms of agricultural production, the new state and the emergence of industrial capitalism is especially well covered. Beinart's interest in the details of social life in the countryside produce a string of insights into the most important lines of political change. Who else would be able to argue that the 'colonial state took shape in the rural areas not least through the control of animals, their diseases, and the environment?' (1995:42).

More than a synthesis of the revisionist historiography, this is often a very interesting, mildly idiosyncratic, tour through the problems of the last twenty years of research. After discussing the implications of the Glen Grey Act, and noting that it has often been presented as one of the pillars of segregation, Beinart suggests that the law is an historiographical red-herring, notable mainly for its failure to transform the basis of reserve agriculture. But he has also sought to identify several new problems that might warrant further research. Throughout the Apartheid period, Bienart observes, white agriculture was a bastion of skilled African labour. This was the one area of the economy untouched by the Nationalist's call for the protection of white workers (1995:194).

This book also contains many important observations about the development of what we might call 'white South African' culture in the era of Apartheid. (A subject that, until very recently, has fallen outside the historiographical pale). But it must be said that the chapters that deal with what are well known episodes

of national politics are not as interesting as the early chapters on agricultural change. There are several areas of the text that are, inevitably perhaps, dominated by the kind of empirical laundry list characteristic of textbooks.

It is especially in the fields of 20th century political history - the epic battles of organised male workers, the mass campaigns of the African National Congress, the despair of land conflicts and military struggles of the 1970s - that the smooth quality of Beinart's prose is at a singular disadvantage to the massive, detailed, and Technicolor presentations of the Reader Digest's history. I'm probably not the only reader who can't help feeling disappointed that the demands of the textbook distracts Beinart's singular insight from the still unanswered implications of the Brenner debate in southern Africa.

1. Paul Sweezy et al, (1978) *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, London: Verso. Aston, T and C Philpin (1985) *Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.