

# CAPE SOCIETY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

By H. LAWSON

## PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION

**T**HE Dutch East India Company established a permanent settlement at the Cape in order to replace the tribal subsistence economy of the area by a system of commodity production which would be capable of supplying its fleets with provisions. This production was to be carried on partly on estates worked directly by the company and partly by a group of independent farmers.

The first act of the new system was to systematically and forcibly deprive the indigenous tribal society of its wealth in land and cattle. This served the double purpose of ensuring the destruction of the old society and of providing the new system with the means necessary to carry on production. The process of primitive accumulation by robbery was begun on a large scale by the Company itself and was then continued by the independent colonists as soon as they felt strong enough.

Once the tribes in the vicinity of the settlement had been shorn of their possessions it became necessary to organise systematic cattle raids into the interior. These were euphemistically called "bartering expeditions," but contemporary sources mention that they took with them very few articles for barter but plenty of guns and ammunition. In 1702 one such expedition of 45 whites returned after seven months with a booty of 2,000 cattle. Some of the members of the group admitted subsequently that they had been on two or three such enterprises before. Their servants reported that defenceless Kraals were attacked and the occupants killed. These expeditions were generally undertaken by professionals who were hired on a commission basis by the prosperous farmers of the Western Cape. Edicts by the Company forbidding barter in cattle remained a dead letter for none had the capacity or the will to enforce them.

There is ample evidence of the impact of a brutally acquisitive civilisation on the "Hottentot" African tribes. In 1699, Capt. Bergh, commander of the Cape garrison, found the Hessequas who had once been rich in cattle, "ten kraals strong . . . with many people and few cattle. I have aforetime visited them when these people were 85 kraals one beside the other; now this nation is so impoverished that there is little to be got from them." By 1757 the effects of primitive accumulation could be felt far inland and a landdrost reported to the governor about conditions in the Bokkeveld and Roggeveld: ". . . the Hottentots there have scarcely any cattle, and complained that the Europeans who have farms there deprive them of their cattle under all kinds of pretexts . . ." It was now no longer necessary to think, as Van Riebeeck had done, of putting the indigenous people to work in chains. Economic compulsion was far stronger than any chain of iron, for when the people had been

robbed of their chief means of subsistence their only chance of survival lay in the performance of menial labour for those who now owned the means of production. Thus the traveller Dampier writes: "Those of the Hottentots that live by the Dutch town have their greatest subsistence from the Dutch, for there is one or more of them belonging to every house. They do all sorts of servile work . . . Three or four of their nearest relations sit at the doors or near the Dutch House, waiting for the scraps and fragments that come from the Table . . ."

This description must be contrasted with Van Riebeeck's account of the herds of 10,000 cattle that belonged to these paupers scarcely a half century previously. Those of the Hottentots that did not end up as servants of the Dutch were either killed by marauding parties of cattle thieves or else fell into a chronic state of malnutrition and destitution in which they became an easy prey to many diseases. Ruling class historians have sought to ascribe the destruction of the "Hottentot" clans to mysterious epidemics and to the ravages of smallpox. However, it is now clear that the reasons for these calamities were ultimately social and not biological.

### **EFFECTS OF SLAVERY**

If the "Hottentot" population of the Cape suffered most severely from the ravages of the robber civilisation that was established by the Dutch East India Company, the contradictions within that civilisation itself were far from negligible. After the first few decades the rule of the Company developed into a force that was oppressive and retrogressive in all its aspects. The eighteenth century was marked by the struggles of the independent commodity producers against the shackles of Company rule.

The reactionary influence of the Company derived from two main factors: firstly, its policy of trade monopoly and market restrictions which were designed to assure to itself the highest possible mercantile profits, and secondly, the introduction of a system of social production based on slavery. Only the first of these factors was widely recognised at the time as retrogressive, but in the final analysis the second factor was probably the more important of the two.

The introduction of slavery, a pre-capitalist form of social production, by a typically capitalist group like the Dutch East India Company appears to be a historical paradox. The key to this paradox lies in the purely mercantile character of the Company's capitalism, that is to say, it was a capitalism that had not yet penetrated the field of production and therefore could do little more than extend older systems which it already found in existence. By gearing these older systems of production to the production of commodities for an extended market, capitalism did however greatly intensify the exploitation of human labour involved in these systems.

The slave system which the Company introduced at the Cape acted as a brake on progress in two ways. In the first place, slave labour is notoriously inefficient and unproductive. It has never been able to compete with free wage labour, let alone the labour of independent producers. For the Cape this meant that it could never hope to compete on the European market, and the plundered East provided no market worth

speaking of. The lack of an export market condemned the agriculture of the colony to a chronic state of stagnation which lasted into the nineteenth century. This economic stagnation meant stagnation in other fields as well. Such commodities as wheat could always be produced more cheaply by the expensive free labour of Europe than by the cheap slave labour of South Africa. The point is that cheap labour is inseparable from low productivity. This fact will continue to act as a brake on the development of South Africa as long as it retains its semi-colonial status.

A second pernicious effect derived from the inevitable tie between slavery and a low level of productive technique. The slave owner tended to invest his money in more and more slaves, instead of making improvements in his land or buying machinery. Thus the profits of slavery merely served to enslave more human beings, they left the actual basis of production quite untouched. The continuation of primitive methods and the failure to improve the land led to further stagnation in agriculture.

The slave owners of the Cape, with very few exceptions, were thus far from prosperous. In 1717 the Secunde to the Governor reports that "there are not thirty families who can be regarded as self-sufficient," the great majority being deeply in debt, with heavy mortgages on their properties. In South Africa there has often been a direct relation between the relative poverty of the master and the absolute poverty of the serf. It is only with the coming of capitalist methods of agricultural production in relatively modern times that new and far more vicious methods of exploiting rural labour led to the intensive accumulation of wealth in the countryside.

## **EFFECTS OF MONOPOLY**

It is an outworn myth that capitalism thrives on competition. The natural tendency is always to raise profits by eliminating competition. The Dutch East India Company followed this rule as closely as the giant combines of today. The apparently exceptional free trade policy of British capitalism in the 19th century was of course designed to secure the maximum advantages from the monopoly position held by British industry at the time.

The monopoly of trade held by the Company manifested itself in various ways at the Cape. The farmers had to sell their products to the Company at a fixed price. The Cape traders led a precarious existence, depending increasingly on the smuggling trade with foreign ships when they visited Table Bay. They were repeatedly refused permission to trade in their own ships. Taxes imposed by the Company acted as a further brake on economic development.

These restrictions on the local unfolding of commodity production and of an indigenous capitalism led to political action on the part of those concerned. These were mainly the traders of Cape Town and the wealthier farmers of the Western Cape. They were a potential local capitalist class and they resented the restrictions of colonial rule. Their activities erupted in the so-called rebellion of Adam Tas near the beginning of the eighteenth century and in the more important "Kaapse

"Patriotte" movement towards the end of the century. In the writings of the latter we can find an interesting echo of the conceptions of men like Locke and Grotius who had formed part of the ideological vanguard of the capitalist class in Europe when it was fighting against feudalism. News of the War of Independence of the North American colonies also seems to have impressed the Cape Burghers.

## **THE TREKBOERS**

The majority of the colonists were so impoverished that the privileges demanded by the wealthier sections would have been useless to them. They had practically no capital and no possible market for any of their agricultural products. Their only way out was to revert to a primitive subsistence economy not unlike that of the indigenous population which they had replaced. They spread out over the interior, adopting a system of nomadic pastoralism which was essentially African.

It needed very little capital to start out as a pastoralist. So the trekboer spread his primitive economy (and the primitive culture based in it) far and wide. During the 18th century there were many comments on the progressive deterioration of the land due to the trekboer's habits of overstocking and steadfastly refusing to make any improvements. When the land was exhausted he simply trekked on. He concentrated purely on the quantity of his stock and was indifferent to its quality. The boers were intensely conservative in their methods and the despair of all those who tried to teach them better ways. When de Mist tried to induce them to breed sheep for wool instead of meat he met with a blank wall of superstition and ignorance.

Because of their constant need for fresh land produced by their primitive and exhausting agricultural methods the boers were constantly quarrelling with one another over pasturage. The rising land values as settlement advanced during the 18th century made it impossible for the poorer farmers to acquire land in the older areas; the only way out for them was to trek to new and sparsely settled areas where land was readily available. The trekking movement had begun by the end of the sixteenth century and continued steadily for almost two centuries. Its peculiar character derived from the fact that it was impelled by poverty. This was no confident advance by a rich and expanding economy; it was a furtive, creeping trickle that seemed to transplant its own poverty, ignorance and cultural sterility wherever it went. It stifled rather than destroyed the indigenous societies in its path; it brought no economic advance, no civilisation, only stagnation and degradation.

When the white colonists arrived at the Cape they brought with them certain economic skills and certain institutions like private property in land. But because of the economic stagnation imposed by the Dutch East India Company deterioration set in with respect to both these factors. Among the pastoral boers there was a definite retrogression in agricultural technique, in some cases leading to the complete abandonment of the cultivation of the soil. Linked with this there appears to have been a distinct loosening of the institution of private property in land. Thus in 1809 at least 25 per cent of the Burghers in the Tulbagh district had no claim to any land of their own, and in Graaff-Reinet in

1812 only between 18 and 25 per cent of the independent farmers appear to have had any claim to land. The rest of the population consisted of nomadic trekboers who roamed the country in search of pasture. Their poverty was great. (Much interesting material on this subject is to be found in Dr. P. J. van der Merwe's book "Trek.")

*The economic poverty of the boers was matched by their cultural poverty which visitors to the Cape invariably commented upon. Let us quote only one example out of many. Miss I. E. Edwards in her "1820 Settlers" quotes a report by the Commissioners of Circuit in 1813 to the effect that in the district of Graaff-Reinet out of 3,400 children not more than 100 had had the opportunity of any education.*

It is obviously pure nonsense to suggest that the trekking boers were in any sense the standard-bearers of civilisation. The guns to which they owed their military superiority were the product of a civilisation utterly different from their own and had to be obtained by barter. The only "blessings" of civilisation that the boers ever conferred on anyone were the most primitive exploitative relationships in the form of labour tenancy and the serfdom of "apprenticeship."

However, it must never be forgotten that the boers were what they were only because of the miserable colonial status of South Africa. Like all Imperialists the merchants of the Dutch East India Company were governed by an overriding fear of competition and over-production. So they exerted a stranglehold on all their colonial possessions, restricting trade and stifling all economic development. They forced the majority of the colonists into a state of economic and cultural degradation. Colonialism was to become more brutal and savage in its methods in the nineteenth century, but never again was it to have such an utterly deadening influence, was it to be so completely devoid of any positive effects as in the days of the Dutch East India Company.