THE FARM-SCHOOL SYSTEM AND BANTU EDUCATION

Photographs by R.W. Harvey

by R.W.Harvey

When the Nationalists took power in 1948 they began methodically to consolidate control over their true political adversaries, the dominated African population. Their strategy was both direct, through police and juridical oppression, but also indirect, by subversion, an undermining of the strengths of their opponents, their disorganisation politically and their fragmentation as a labour movement.

Verwoerd, who became Minister of Native Affairs in 1950, introduced powerful administrative instruments of control. The Abolition of Passes Act (1952) perfected the system of influx control, by which the state regulates employment and unemployment, and apportions labour.[1] The 1953 Bantu Education Act had an equivalent objective, on the ideological plane, in that it was devised to control minds. Until the fifties, education for Africans had been insufficient, uneven, decentralised, dominated by the Churches. To the Nationalists, the importance of a centrally controlled and controlling education apparatus was vividly apparent, hence the thorough going and vigorous reforms they introduced.

It is a simplification, but I think useful, to see the pre-eminence of these two measures reflected in the intensity of repudiation and anger they have provoked. Challenge to the Pass Laws climaxed at Sharpeville in 1960; challenge to Bantu Education ignited South Africa in 1976.

At the same time that they were setting their framework of domination, the Nationalists began to elaborate screen ideologies behind which to manouevre. Apartheid, a mirage of separate communities with corresponding separate loyalties and separate lavatories, is a fantasy in the sense of being mental relief from the despair of a useless struggle. As such it is desired and welcomed by people, who bind themselves to its spurious political extension. On the other hand, in the sense that it is manipulated cynically by those whose purpose is to maintain power, it is simply a national fraud.

Until Piet Koornhof, nobody knew so well how to produce the double talk of apartheid ideology, as Hendrik Verwoerd. On the pivot of this fantasy he presents his Bills, designed for oppression, in terms of virginal philanthropy.

> . . . . . the curriculum (to a certian extent) and educational practice, by ignoring the segregation or 'apartheid' policy, was unable to prepare for service within the Bantu community.[2]

In the same speech he said,

> The present Native schools may be characterised generally as schools within Bantu society but not of that society . . . . . It is the Government's intention to transform them into real Bantu community schools. [3]

The vagueness of these formulations contrasts with the simple clarity of the alternative view that emerges from the same speech. In this view, there is an economic reality to which Bantu education must be made to conform,

> The economic structure of our country, of course, results in large numbers of Natives having to earn their living in the service of Europeans. For that reason it is essential that Bantu pupils should receive instruction in both official languages . . . . . [4]

and,

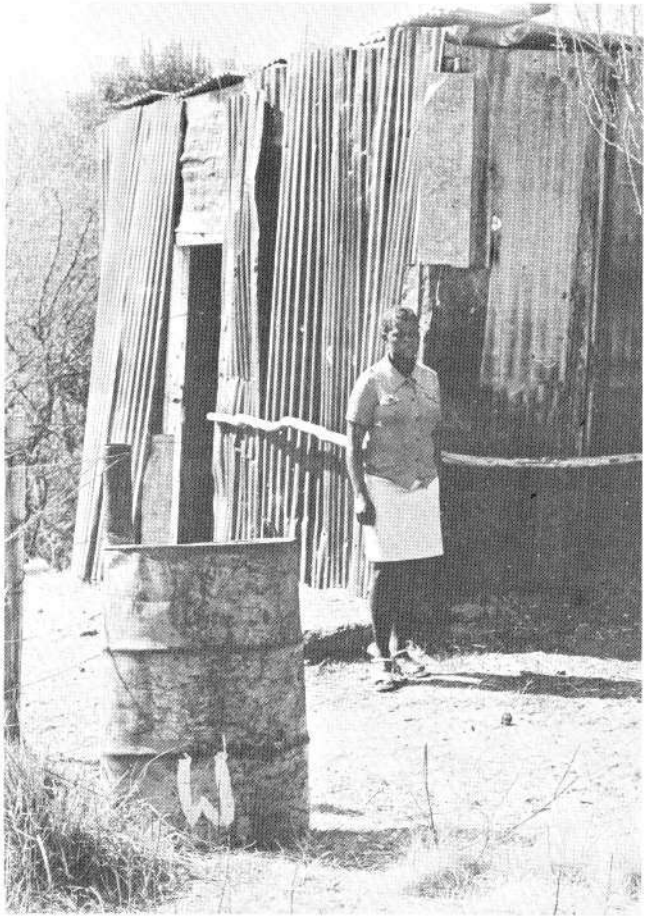
> The school must equip him (that is the 'native') to meet the demands which the economic life of South Africa will impose upon him. [5]

In the light of the two elements I have tried to isolate, the centralisation of Bantu Education, and the disguised ambience of economic realities, we should try to locate the institution and character of Farm Schools.

Together with Mine–and Factory–Schools, Farm Schools constitute a special category. They are said to be 'aided', denoting the practice of allowing support for schools that are primarily initiated by specific interests – mines, factories or farms, for their own labourers, within their own compounds.

A farm school comes into being on the initiative of an individual, who thereupon is appointed manager of that school. In a sense, therefore, they are private institutions, being privately managed; while at the same time they fall under the general supervision of the Department of Bantu Education, and are visited by inspectors on regional circuit. The farmer / manager provides the basic physical structure for the school, while the Department pays teaching staff salaries and contributes small sums towards furniture and books. There is no doubt that the most extraordinary aspect of the farm school system is its semi-private character, which nevertheless articulates with national policy in education and with the general project of subjugation. I would seek in this essay to draw out some of the significance of this juncture between private and national interest.

There are a million African labourers on white farms in the



An unregistered school serving as a church on Sunday.

Republic, and the matter of schooling for their children is consequently of some seriousness. While as a class these workers have no power, and since they are not especially visible, it would be possible to neglect them: yet in fact there are a great number of farm schools, accounting altogether for about a tenth of the total enrolment of African school–children each year. So we see that the system rather straddles a position between extremes; while farm school is decidedly not fully incorporated within the centralised national education form, it does, nevertheless substantially thrive. I don't believe that it is productive to try to account for this by reference to the humanism of farmers, or of any other class of people. There are solid economic reasons for the farm school system, and they are presented quite boldly by Verwoerd. It is the precisd nature of the articulation that ought to be elucidated.

> The establishment of farm schools has in the past been somewhat neglected, resulting in the sending of children to town schools and the moving of parents into the towns. If 'fundamental' education can also be obtained on the farms the trek from the farms will be combated, more especially if the training contributes towards more remunerative employment in farm work, owing to the greater skill and usefulness of labourers. [6]

It is known that one of the most serious burdens farmers shoulder, is the tendency of their labourers to wish themselves elsewhere. In the history of South Africa since the Dutch settlers, a prominent structural theme is the successive modes of enslavement or entrapment of labour on white land. It is obviously to the benefit of the farmer to be able to reconcile his work force to their occupation, and one of the ways to do this is by establishing a school, stabilising families by allowing them what they value highly for their children. Even in cases, of course, where it is a church organisation, or a concerned local farmer who sets up a farm school, the neighbouring farmers will benefit in the same way by the proximity of such a facility; and their contentment is in this case coincident with that of the state, for whom a settled agricultural labour force and a contented farmer voter are bonded elements in their construct of state. In other respects too, the arrangement is appealing to the government. Shifting the burden of school onto the shoulders of private people relieves considerably the bureaucratic apparatus. And there are savings: farm schools are cheap to erect, to run, to close. Group Areas policy can accomodate black schools on white land so long as their impermanence is a feature. Costs are even to be saved on teaching staff.

> To permit the establishment of farm schools, the transfer of land for the building of expensive schools will no longer be required. Bantu mothers can, in accordance with local methods, erect walls where farmers allow it, and the Department will provide the windows, doors and roof. If the farmer withdraws this permission these can be removed. Female teachers will, as far as possible, be recruited locally . . . . . [7]

For the farmer, then, a school is an instrument for stabilising his labour force. There is also the consideration that school may provide a supervisory function over the children on the farm. None the less, it cannot be said that the decision to build a school is an easy one, or that it is accomplished without serious conflict and division within the farmer's mind.

There are distinct disadvantages. Looked at selfishly, a school is a considerable nuisance. It attracts children, for one thing, and this leads to trouble for the farmer. He complains that they tramp pathways, causing erosion; that they defecate in the veld, infecting the browsing cattle; that they drop plastic bags, on which livestock choke; that they bend fences, steal pumpkins, etc. etc.

Such-like complaints are ubiquitous. The conflict is never settled and endures while the school exists and constantly threatens it. Schools close down as well as open. The owner/manager may decide to abandon the school; or he may sell his property, and the new owner not want to retain a school; or original conditions may alter, a lack of labour turn to an excess, and the need for the school fall away. West of Pretoria there is a farm school that was established in the thirties and that has changed its location five times, within a radius of a few miles, being closed down on one farm, re-opened on another.

It is not above mentioning that the struggle may be between the farmer and his wife, she wanting the school, he opposing it, for example. And while they are engaged in dialectics of this sort, the school carries on half-heartedly in a shed. That's symbolic of their compromise: she gets her way, but he spoils the effect. There might be a difference between neighbours, one willing to erect and maintain a school, the other objecting to its proximity. Neighbours wishes weigh heavily in the matter of Bantu schools. Bultfontein, a school in the Krugersdorp circuit, was closed abruptly following complaints from nearby residents who disliked the noise the children made at play. Several hundred pupils were turned out, with no school nearby to which to go.

Given that the initiative for starting or retaining a farm school rests with farmers, it can be said that the number of such schools in existence necessarily suits them. For the agricultural sector of capital, and for the state, the amount of farm schooling is always optimum.

Looking with the eyes of African parents and children, however, there is never enough school.The inadequacy is not a function of too little finance, too few facilities, physical items, buildings, chairs etc, though these certainly are pitifully inadequate. It is produced quite simply by the fact that schooling for Africans is controlled by policies that actually have nothing to do with education at all. To judge the logistics of the situation by standards of education would be to misrecognise the presence of the ideological construct one of whose facets is Bantu education.

Aside from the implicit fault in the institution, a farm school system does exist, and does have objective deficiencies:

a) There are areas where no farmer has been found willing to erect a school. In some places there exists a lower primary, but not an upper primary — or the other way about. A school may be restricted to the children of one farm, excluding children from adjacent farms. The school may have a limited quota of pupils, so that some applicants are turned away.

b) Poverty is such among farm labourers, that many children are unable to get to school for want of money for clothes, fees, books and food. Frequently their labour is needed by their family: older children are expected to look after younger, the old or sick must be helped, livestock must be tended. Malnutrition is common, and causes sickness and lassitude.

c) The schools are short of furniture, books, apparatus, sports facilities. You won't find a gym or a laboratory. You might not find a latrine. Water is often a problem. The buildings are not conditioned, and lack warmth in winter, coolth in summer. They seldom have electric lights.

d) The quality of teaching tends to be poor. A depressed morale in rural areas is induced by the career uncertainty endemic in schools that may or may not last. There is also isolation and the sense of living in a backwater. For teachers, a profound sense of futility flows from this, and from the work of educating children whose manifest destiny is to fail school and become labourers on some local farm.

Possibly the gravest social abuse within the farm environment relates to the practice of exploiting child labour. Thorough analysis of this would require a separate paper; but I do not wish to imply, by neglect, that it does not, in some way, lie at the very heart of this question of schooling.

That farmers use child labour is not in question. You have only to stand on a road between Weenen and Tugela Ferry at five in the morning, to see trucks go by laden to the tailgate with children on their way to some farm where they will put in heavy hours of work for a pitiful return. They are not physically constrained to work: their choice is co-opted, together with that of their parents who would find it hard to live without the slight extra of the childrens' earnings. It is sometimes a condition of residence on land, that all members of a family should contribute labour to the owner. In this way a voluntary abandonment of school takes place, seasonally or permanently.

One of the misfortunes that stems from this practice, is that the concept of labour itself is contaminated, and the debate concerning relations between education and production (a vigorous topic in many progressive countries) is here prejudiced by a confusion between labour and exploitation. What we can be sure of in the present context, is that the work the children are made to do on white farms, is not at all intended to combine in educative ways with what they may be taught in school.

We can specify the following possible relations between the use of child labour and schooling in the farm environment:

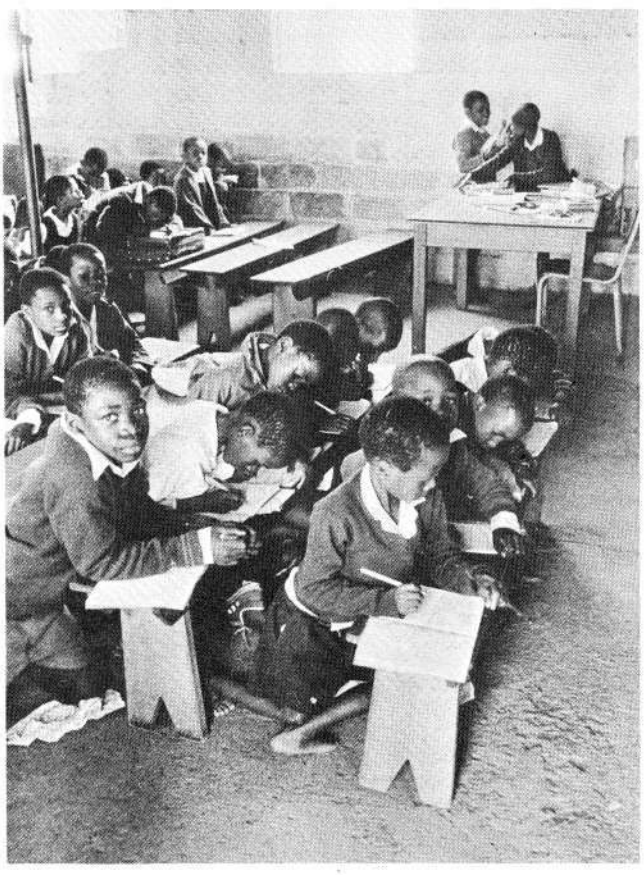
a) A farmer might decline to establish a school in case it absorbs too much of the labour-time of children on his farm.

b) He might set up a school in order to use the organisation provided thereby to marshall the children for work. A former Minister of Bantu Education, Mr Willie Maree, had this to say: "If there is any farmer who has a farm school and who wishes to make use of the school children under the supervision of the teacher to assist with certain activities, this can be arranged in a proper manner . . . . . "

c) There may be a farm school in an area to which children cannot go because they owe labour to the farmer on whose property they live.

d) Children may go to school part of the time, but be required to work during their hours out of school.

The picture outlined here is not confined to isolated and remote areas. The farm school system applies on the very doorstep of major industrial centres and cities. In what is now peri-urban land, the former large farms are subdivided into plots and small-holdings, some not more than a few acres in size. These have become dormitory suburbs of the nearby towns, and the density of population has substantially increased. Besides the white owners, there are to be found multitudes of maids, cooks, gardeners,stablehands, farm workers, tenants, squatters. Many are 'illegal', but the police ignore their presence so long as they contribute services to the region, and so long as there is no definite need



A Department school in Pretoria West Circuit. Three distinct classes are in session.

to harass them. Their illegal status is taken advantage of by employers, who pay low wages. Now in such a community, never mind its transience, its 'illegality', its submerged and hidden identity, there are numerous children, and they need schools. It is in these circumstances that one can see the failure of the farm school system in its most intense form. Though the inadequacy of statistics make it impossible to assert this without caution, it becomes fairly evident to anyone making enquiries within the triangle bounded by Pretoria, Krugersdorp and Johannesburg, that there are as many children not attending school as there are attending; that there are, in other words, hundreds of children deprived almost totally of elementary education. In this and similar areas all the previously mentioned lacks are present in amplified form: the poverty, malnutrition, dearth of schools, distances to travel, child labour, overcrowding, miserable classrooms, poor teaching, high rate of failure, low morale (and always as well, heroic dedication of some teachers, some parents, some pupils, some managers).

Proximity to the factories of wealth and to the conspicuous consumption of urban (white) elites, makes the contrast utterly shameful. It is precisely in these conditions that unregistered schools appear, called into being by a lack and by the need for any rudimentary education offered. These are run by untrained people, motivated either by the earnings possible, or by some deep moral commitment to the people. In either case, such schools are significant both in their persistence and in their poverty. They are frequently housed in cow-sheds or in shanties. You would find, not far north of Johannesburg, schools in shacks of tin and cardboard, within clear sight of millionaires' mansions.

Deficiencies notwithstanding, any school is a powerful magnet to its surrounding community. For some children it is the chance of escape from farm labour. A few, through brilliance and fortune pass their grades and go to secondary school; but most drop out along the way and find work on a farm. Failure reconciles people to low positions, for it seems to them that their own stupidity is the cause. In this way aquiescence and servility are nourished in the African child.

This brings us to the question of Bantu Education as an ideological tool. Farm schools, as I have said, are part of a national structure, in that the children follow a common syllabus and write department exams. Teachers are paid by the department, so that their (at least outward) conformity can be assumed. The syllabus is far from neutral: I would say that its overall objective is to support the status quo, to regulate the minds of African pupils within conceptions favourable to the present structures of domination.

a) Education for blacks differs from that for whites, and reinforces the notion of racial heirarchy, to the disadvantage of the former

b) Syllabus content is emphatically propagandistic

c) There is no acceptable relation between what children are taught and their actual circumstances.

d) The practise of the school-room submits children to an acceptance of drill and conformity, of use later to an authoritarian state.

e) The select and reject system under which so many African children are debarred from school from an early age, is unsuitable in a country that has such a huge population of insufficiently educated members.

One is directed into a strange perplexity, where an extension or improvement of school facilities can but submit more children than before to a syllabus and a pedagogy that are harmful. If one recognises that farm schools are designed to help farmers, and that the syllabus is designed to help the state, how can one reasonably suggest improvements? It would appear that progress is effectually blocked until both determinants of the system have been replaced.

In the meantime it is crucial to inspect with care the modalities that have produced Bantu Education. We must try to comprehend the motivation of people involved, the political and class positions of those who confirm and those who challenge Bantu Education. A fundamentally abusive system sets up complex tensions and currents of feeling in people;

A Department School in Pretoria West Circuit. Three distinct classes are in session.

Bultfontein school now derelict three years after it was closed.

and it is in this turbulence that we must look for the possibility and direction of change.

We have seen that there is a conflict in the farmer over the establishment of farm schools. Officials of the Department also demonstrate troubled minds: many of them experience a conflict of loyalties, since education is their objective, and the Department is their employer, and the claims of the two do not often coincide. It is not unusual for regional inspectors to connive at transgressions of rules they are supposed to apply.

More serious, more substantial, is the conflict endured by parents and teachers, who must seem to lend themselves and give support to a structure they may feel to be disgraceful and damaging, and yet which is all that is available. Between their need to teach and earn a living, and their disapproval of Bantu Education, teachers are fatally trapped. This is true of parents as well. They do not wish their children to remain illiterate and inumerate like themselves, and therefore they favour whatever schooling is available. If they can they send their children to school, because not to do so would be even more unacceptable.

As for the pupils, they are not necessarily and in every case victims. Education is always double-edged. Schooling is not bounded by the school precincts, but children are prepared by their homes and parents and by a more general environment for the way in which they receive and absorb the education they are given in school. It is by no means certain that propaganda in favour of the dominant political arrangements will not have the reverse effect of concentrating contempt for the state.

In countries that have fought their way to democracy, a wealth of creative work is being accomplished in education theory and practice. There the nature of school is seriously considered, sensitively and intellingently discussed. We do not occupy yet even that zero point, ourselves, where an education for human beings can be produced and elaborated. Bantu Education is not for people; it is part concession, part indoctrination. It is like a break-water, designed to take the energy of advance and quell it into a safe ebb and flow.

One last quotation from Verwoerd will give us a clear retrospective perception of the political and controlling purpose behind Bantu Education as a whole,

> It is abundantly clear that unplanned education creates many problems, disrupting the community life of the Bantu and endangering the community life of the European . . . . . For that reason planned Bantu Education must be substituted for the unplanned. [8] □

REFERENCES:

1 See R. de Villiers, "The Pass Laws: Allocation and Control (1760–1979)" S.A. Labour Bulletin Vol 5 No. 4 November 1979

2. Statement by H.F. Verwoerd in the Senate, 7th June 1954. Verwoerd's famous statement appears to me still to be the clearest exposition of Nationalist education policy for blacks.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

Printed by L. Backhouse, Pietermaritzburg S 880